



Tri-Counties Regional Center Working on Friendships

Commonly asked questions about Tri-Counties Regional Center

SERVICES

Why are friendships and community connections important for children and adults with developmental disabilities?

People with disabilities report that friendships with non-disabled community members are extremely important to them. Friendships help all of us feel valued and more in control of our lives. In addition, they offer feedback, assistance in making life decisions, emotional support, and companionship. It has even been proven that positive social relationships promote better health and longer life. The behavior of persons with disabilities becomes more positive and their motivation improves, when classmates really like and spend time with them.

If friendships are so important, then why isn't more being done to make them happen?

For one thing, there is a tendency to think of "community integration" as activities such as shopping or going to the movies rather than participating with other community members in shared social and recreational activities. In addition, we tend to think that community members are not interested in spending time with people with disabilities. Experience proves this is not the case. Often, they just need to be asked. Once involved, they get back as much as they give because they learn about "acceptance" and realize that individuals with disabilities contribute many unique and fine qualities such as spontaneity, reliability, trust, and honesty.

What can the regional center, parents, and service providers do to support friendships with community members?

Planning teams need to talk more often about how friendships can be important natural supports and find ways to build them. One-to-one matching, such as "Best Buddies" is one volunteer approach. Another is to build a group or "circle" around the person to offer special support and increase friendships. This has been done successfully in school settings. As for day program or employment efforts, planning teams need to demand that job coaches focus not only on teaching job skills but also on encouraging and supporting positive relationships with fellow employees. Furthermore, teams should insist that day program agencies actively seek places for community connection during the day. For example, staff have assisted individuals to become "regulars" in coffee shops or cafes or volunteers at the Humane Society and museums. Finally, teams need to identify the person's interests and help build bridges with the community at all times—including evenings and weekends—not just during school or program hours.