

Parenting

ORANGE COUNTY

Befriending Special Needs Kids

My new next-door neighbor has an autistic son the same age as my son Kenny. I have encouraged Kenny to reach out and befriend him. But I'm afraid I don't really understand myself how to befriend a person with a disability. Can you offer any advice? —*Tentative Friend, Anaheim Hills*

Health & Wellness

Children with special needs such as autism, learning delays and other disabilities often struggle to find friends who are patient, friendly and open to being a pal to someone who is different.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) one in six school-aged children have a neurological impairment. And autism, specifically, is on the rise, affecting one in every 166 children born in the U.S. today. A new case of autism is being diagnosed every 21 minutes.

Parents can help their typical children understand and include children with special needs by letting them know that not everyone acts, learns, communicates and plays the same way they do. It is also important to let your children know that everyone needs a friend and the most significant thing they can do is to try to be a friend to other children outside their immediate circle.

How you can set the stage for your child to develop this new friendship:

- **Begin by teaching your child about people with disabilities.** The more a child understands, the easier it is to become friends and accept someone with special needs. Some great books that share this message are:
 - *I Love My Brother! A Preschoolers View of Living with a Brother*
 - *Who Has Autism* by Connor Sullivan
 - *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee* by Mary Thompson
 - *Ian's Walk - A Story About Autism* by Laurie Lears
 - *What's Wrong with Timmy?* by Maria Shriver
- **Take time to answer your children's questions.** Respectfully listen to and answer children's questions about themselves and others. Do not ignore questions, change the subject, sidestep or admonish the child for asking a question. These responses suggest that what the child is asking is bad. Answer all questions in a direct, matter-of-fact manner. Listen carefully to what children want to know and what they are feeling.
- **Work on creating a home environment that supports diversity.** Make it a firm rule that a person's identity is never an acceptable

reason for teasing or rejecting them. Immediately step in if you hear or see your child engage in such activity.

- **Provide opportunities to interact.** Parents may need to actively seek out opportunities for their children to interact with children with disabilities. Parents must actively arrange for ongoing opportunities for children to play together and interact. How your children can begin developing a friendship with someone who is different:
 - **Begin by saying 'Hi!'** Encourage your children not to be afraid to say hello and smile at a person with a disability. This is a great way to let someone know that you care and help them feel welcomed.
 - **Try, try, and try again!** Sometimes it may take a few attempts to make a connection with a new friend because they may not be able to hear you or be focused intently on something else. Try again, don't give up, it will be well worth it.
 - **Invite your new friend over for safe play.** Often special needs children get overlooked for friendship activities that everyone enjoys. Invite friends with disabilities to sleep over, come to your house to play or to your birthday party. Think about ways to make sure that they can be included in the things that you do.
 - **And don't forget the golden rule...** Treat a person with a disability the way you like to be treated and you'll have a friend for life.
- Opening your heart to new friends can make a huge difference for you and in your community, it will teach your children life long lessons that many in this world haven't yet learned. The population of special needs children is growing and the better we understand how to interact the more amazing friendships can be.
- Lisa Ackerman, Director of TACA



Lisa Ackerman is the mother of a child with autism and the Executive Director of Talk About Curing Autism (TACA). TACA provided education, information and support to CA families who love someone with autism
www.tacanow.org