

BY STEPHANIE CONNER



A Friend Indeed

A new program for schools helps teach children social skills and encourages friendship

When Karen Donmoyer walked her twin girls to school, she watched as other students happily greeted one another and ran off to play. She recalls the pain of seeing an absence of similar engagement or even basic greetings exchanged with her children. “It was as if my children were invisible,” she says.

Jennifer Croll saw the same patterns of isolation in her son, Jack.

Seeking a way to socially engage children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), Donmoyer and Croll co-founded the nonprofit FRIEND™ Playground Club Inc. in January. FRIEND is an acronym coined by the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC) that stands for Fostering Relationships In Early Network Development. After a \$5,000 jumpstart from The Enlightened Coalition for Heightened Opportunities (ECHO) and more fundraising, they hired SARRC to facilitate the program at the K-8 Copper Ridge School in Scottsdale.

“One of the major symptoms of autism is difficulty with social skills,” says Joseph Gentry, Ph.D., SARRC’s director of school consultation services. “So, we put them in school and give them a classroom aide to assist them with academics and social skills and ensure they are successful throughout the school day. But lunchtime is the most unstructured part of the day and the most social part of the day—and they’re typically all alone.”

The Program

Crucial to the FRIEND Playground Club is the education and empowerment of a child’s typical peers. Without fully understanding the scope of autism, typical children may be reluctant to approach a child with the disorder. Sometimes, not understanding why a child is “different” lends itself to teasing, bullying or socially shunning that child. Once educated, however, children gain the understanding and skills to befriend, guide and mentor others.

The FRIEND Playground Club adds structure to playtime and encourages interaction. “During the pilot program, a SARRC staff member went out to the playground from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. every day and set up structured activities like Jenga, potato sack races or a kick ball game,” explains Gentry, who also

Children with autism and their typically developing peers at Copper Ridge School in Scottsdale participate in the pilot FRIEND Playground Club.

designed a study to measure the program’s effectiveness.

“We started with baseline data on each of five target students at Copper Ridge,” Gentry says. “We filmed their

interactions and recorded the number of times they approached a typical peer, how often they were approached and if they were part of games and activities. After we started with all of the activities, we saw major increases in engagement.”

Croll doesn’t need a study to tell her that the program delivered results for Jack. “Three days before the program, he was circulating the perimeter of the playground,” she says. “Three days into the program, he was playing Jenga with other kids. He’s now interacting. He has friends. His self-confidence has increased, and he looks forward to going to school.”

Donmoyer, too, has watched her girls develop friendships. “They seem to be proud of the fact that they have friends. They’re invited on play dates more,” she says. “It’s such a simple program, but it delivers such huge results.”

And those results aren’t limited to children with ASDs.

“This isn’t necessarily an autism program. It’s a friendship program,” Gentry says. “It can help every student. For example, we saw two little boys who were getting in trouble a lot. They started participating in some of the games. It turned out they just needed structure, and the disciplinary actions decreased.”

What’s Next

For Donmoyer and Croll, the mission is ambitious. “We want to reach all kids and change the social community in the school,” Donmoyer says.

To do that, Gentry explains, the group is evolving the program to make it easy to implement and affordable for schools. This evolution includes developing training for school staff and parents, engaging six-through eighth-grade students in the mentoring and facilitating process, and partnering with local colleges and universities to provide graduate students as program facilitators in exchange for college credit.

Meanwhile, Croll says she envisions the program expanding to schools throughout Arizona and all over the country.

“Nobody’s socially coached in our nation,” she says. “I am passionate about the need for that.” ▶

SARRC owns the FRIEND trademark, and SARRC has licensed it to FRIEND Playground Club.

Best FRIEND

To donate to the FRIEND™ Playground Club or to learn how to bring the program to your child’s school, go to www.thefriendplaygroundclub.org or contact Karen Donmoyer at 480-993-6006 or ktndonmoyer@mindspring.com.