

How can you help to include a person with Down syndrome as well as other neuro-diverse learners in your school community?

When I was in kindergarten I desperately wanted to be friends with a girl in my class named Maya. Maya was adorable- she was so tiny, and she spoke in a tiny, quiet voice. Maya was an amazing reader, and in kindergarten I couldn't read at all, so one day Maya read me a story about owls. It was a great story, and I had to listen very carefully to understand Maya's words. But I was so happy that my friend Maya could read me stories. As we journeyed through school together, I learned a lot about Maya. In Grade One, we dressed up together as twins for 'twin day' at school. Maya loved to play games and she loved owls. She loved to play in the toy kitchen and to play house. I loved to play with her. Something else that I grew to learn about Maya is that she has Down syndrome. I think it's important to note that Maya having Down syndrome was not the first thing I knew about her. It was an 'extra' that I found out as we grew older. I think that our approach to including all people in our school needs to begin with the realization that we are all just human first. Every person has their gifts and their strengths, as well as their struggles. It takes the whole community working together to foster authentic relationships to make sure that inclusion is successful.

Knowing Maya has enriched my life and the lives of all of my classmates. Maya is hilarious- the funniest person I know and she can always make me laugh. She tells funny stories and teases me all of the time. She is incredibly loyal. Grade 5 was a very tough year for me and I remember telling my mom that I knew that Maya would always be kind to me. She made me feel secure in our friendship and was always happy to see me. These are some of the strengths that drew me to Maya.

In any friendship, it's important to acknowledge the struggles as well. For Maya, one of her struggles is communication. I have learned to listen very carefully to what Maya says and I have earned her trust to make sure that she feels safe communicating with me. I have also had very good instruction about how to be a better communicator with Maya from the adults around her (her very talented E.A's and Learning Resource Teachers). They would teach me how to best encourage Maya. I feel really special that now I am one of the people who understands Maya best, and I can help her to communicate her feelings when she needs support.

Maya's family have also been very supportive by making sure that Maya and I can have playdates outside of school. When I signed up to coach Special Olympics swimming last year, they signed Maya up too and then we got to swim together every weekend too! It was so fun! Maya and I always want to have sleepovers so our families even planned some stays together at a hotel so that we could have a 'sleepover.' We went to the aquarium together and got ice cream late at night and walked on the beach and laughed A LOT! Now my family all love Maya too!

I think that having people at school such as the teachers and EA's recognize that I loved spending time with Maya and then having these people teach me how to be a good

friend to her, were the first step to making sure that I was being inclusive. I was able to help teach my other classmates these skills as well. Since moving to high school it has been more difficult to ensure that Maya is being included in everything because I am not in all of her classes. But in PE a new student noticed me playing a game with Maya and she came over to join us. She followed what we were doing and has since taken a real interest in Maya and they are forming a friendship as well.

The next thing that really helped to ensure that Maya and I had a real friendship was the support of both of our families. Making sure that Maya and I could still talk (even over Facetime during a global pandemic) have helped to ensure that even when things are difficult at school, Maya and I have our relationship outside of school too.

I understand that not everyone in life has a “Maya,” and I am not saying that things are perfect or easy- but in my opinion, having the adults who worked with Maya at school recognize in me the ability to be a good friend to Maya and then having them teach me the tools necessary to be a good friend, was the single most important step in ensuring that Maya was included at school. It’s also important to note that there are other students in our class who also have their own unique relationships and friendships with Maya as well, and these have all been supported and maintained through the initial education and support of educational staff and have been further developed by the parents. Moving forward, identifying students who express a desire or interest to engage with neuro-diverse students at the school level, and then having specific, targeted conversations with these students to support them with education would be the first step in ensuring that there is successful inclusion at school. Allowing many social and fun opportunities for students to get to know each other is the key to maintaining these relationships over time. Maya has always provided me comfort when I am sad, and her friendship is something that I will always treasure! I am so grateful to have her as my friend.