

## **Understanding Friends**

### **A program to educate children about differences, and to foster empathy**

**by Catherine Faherty, Asheville TEACCH Center**

reprinted by permission

Understanding Friends is designed to be presented to classes of students in the elementary and middle grades. Adaptations are made for older classes. This article contains lesson plans and a list of supplies that you will need. After fifteen years of presenting this program to thousands of students, I have found that it is most effective, in most cases, to go beyond the generic program and to discuss specific issues, giving accurate information about real students. The two options (B and C) will help you with this.

#### **A. Introduction to Understanding Friends: The Generic Program**

Understanding Friends can be presented as a "generic" program. Important concepts and issues will be presented and discussed; however specifics about a particular child or group of children are not brought up. The introduction is a complete program in itself and contains the following three parts. A complete description is given, beginning on the next page.

Part 1 - Abilities: We are different and we are the same

Part 2 - Experiential Activity Centers

Part 3 - Receptive Language Demonstration

The program can end here, or you can choose one of the following options.

#### **B. (OPTION) Introduction to a special class, and its members**

After the introductory program, information is shared about the special class, and its members. This is recommended if members of the general education classroom are peer tutors with the special students, and/or if members of the special class participate in activities in the general education classroom.

#### **C. (OPTION) Understanding your classmate**

After the introductory program, a discussion is facilitated about the classmate with autism. Typically, the classmate is a member of the general education class, where there are questions (and probably misunderstandings) about this student. Depending on the student, he or she might not be present for this initial discussion.

**NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY:** If you are a teacher who wants to educate your students about autism and how it relates to the classroom environment and their classmate, it goes without saying that it must be done with the full permission of the child's parents. Depending on the age and level of understanding of the child, it may be desirable to have his or her permission as well. There may be individual situations where it may not feel right yet, to a particular family or child. Even beyond the ethics of confidentiality, which obviously apply here, it is imperative that the desires of those parents and children who are hesitant to share such personal information with others, must be respected. In these cases, you could present only the generic program.

## Lesson Plan for Understanding Friends

### A. Introduction to Understanding Friends: The Generic Program

Understanding Friends can be presented as a "generic" program. General issues will be presented and discussed, however specifics about a particular child or group of children are not brought up. Adaptations are made depending on the ages of the students. This generic program serves as an introduction if you end with options B or C. The program usually takes about 45-60 minutes.

**SET-UP:** Arrive ahead of time so you have plenty of time to set up the experiential activity centers. See the Understanding Friends Supply List and Description of Experiential Activities for further set-up information.

#### Part 1 - Abilities: We are different and we are the same

Explain to the class that the purpose of the program is to help them imagine what it might be like to have "different abilities" than they do now; to understand why some people act differently than they might expect. Write the word "ability" on the board and talk about what it means. Write the word "unique" on the board and talk about what it means.

Explain that everyone has different abilities. Say that you want to find out how the students in the class are different. Have them raise their hands in response to questions, such as these:

Who can ride a bicycle?

Who can roller skate?

Who can roller-blade?

Who knows the multiplication tables through 5's?

Who knows how to do long division?

Who knows the multiplication tables 6's through 12's?

Who has messy handwriting? (Or who needs more practice with their cursive?)

Who has really, really, neat handwriting?

Who is good at video games?

Who runs in medium or slow speed?

Who runs at a very fast speed?

Who knows how to knit?

Who can make a batch of cookies?

Etc...

It is important that not every child answers affirmatively to every question, so you can show diversity. So, for the youngest grades, or if all the students raise their hands for every question, it is best to include questions such as the following.

Who has black hair ?

Who has blonde hair?

Who has brown hair?

Who wears glasses?

Etc...

Comment on the fact that everyone has different abilities or qualities about themselves that make them unique among others.

Now describe a scene on the playground, and ask..."Have you ever played kickball [or other relevant game] and when it was your turn to kick, you planned to really kick it hard so it would go far...and when the ball was pitched to you, you tried to kick it, but you missed?" You can act this out while you are talking to make it more dramatic. Ask "Who likes it when the other kids say, '...don't worry, try again, it's okay, you can do it,\_\_\_'?" Or who likes it when they say "...don't be so stupid, why did you do that?" Typically, all of the children will raise their hands to agree with wanting to be understood.

Now ask "Who likes it when people understand you?" Questions can also be phrased slightly differently, like "Who wants friends who understand you?" or "Who likes it when their friends understand them?"

Comment on the fact that even though everyone has different abilities, talents , and qualities, that we are the same in one basic way; we all want other people to understand us.

If you are doing the generic program, you can begin to explain the activities now. See Part 2, below.

If you are going to do OPTION B, say now that you are here to help them understand about the children in the special class in Room \_\_\_\_\_. Now go directly to Part 2, below.

If you are going to do OPTION C, say now that you are there to help them better understand \_\_\_\_\_ (their peer), who is a friend of yours. Now go directly to Part 2, below.

## Part 2 - Experiential Activity Centers: Groups Rotate

Introduce the following activities and have the teacher divide the class into 3 groups. If you have set up 4 experiential activity centers, then the class must be divided into 4 groups. I recommend using three centers. This makes the class and the program more manageable and keeps it within a realistic time-frame. A description of recommended centers are listed at the end of these lesson plans, under Understanding Friends Supply List and Description of Experiential Activities.

Introduce each center briefly, holding up the materials at that table. For example, for the activity to simulate fine motor difficulties, you might say: "When you get to the center at the round table, you will wear these big gloves...they are supposed to be too large for you, that's OK. When you are wearing them, you are supposed to string these beads and then screw these nuts and bolts and washers together. You will find out what it would be like if the muscles in your hands worked differently than they do now." For older children, you can explain the

term "fine motor". Assure them that it is OK to have fun with this, but at the same time, ask them to think about what kinds of things might be harder to do if their fine motor skills were like that. Ask them what might be different for them. How would they (or their work) appear different to others? Would they need any special kind of assistance?

Each center should be facilitated by a teacher or other adult. This person can ask thought-provoking questions during the activity.

You will ring a bell when it is time for the groups to rotate from center to center. Keep this going pretty quickly, in order to hold their interest. After each group has visited each center, say that you are now going to pick a student to help you demonstrate something, but it needs to be a student who can follow directions well. You will choose your helper as soon as everyone is back in their seats. This encourages all the students to immediately return to their seats.

### Part 3 - Receptive Language Demonstration: "Set the table"

While the students are returning to their seats, prepare a desk at the front of the room, by placing 10-15 different miscellaneous items on it. Among these items should be a plate, cup, spoon, and a fork, scattered about on the desk. Hidden from sight, you will have a manila folder on which an outline of a table setting (plate, cup, spoon, fork) is drawn. Keep this "table-setting jig" hidden for now.

After choosing a volunteer, have him or her come up and sit at the desk facing the class. Depending on the dynamics of the class, it is sometimes helpful to pick a student who seems to be a bully or most in need of developing some empathy. (But it must be a student who has volunteered.)

Ask the student if he or she is able to hear you well enough in order to follow your instructions exactly. Tell him that you want him to listen very carefully. Then with no change of tone, point to the materials on the desk in front of him and tell him to set the table, but give the instructions in another language. Being from a bilingual Greek family, I always use Greek. If you do not know a second language, make sure that ahead of time, you have someone teach you the proper verbal instructions, and memorize them. Obviously, you want to be careful not to choose a volunteer student who might know the language you are using, so choose your volunteer carefully and stay away from a very common second language in your area, like Spanish. Some presenters prefer to use a made-up lingo of gobbledy-goop.

Repeat the foreign instructions slowly, then loudly, then simplify the words. Point to the table and, depending on the age of the student, you can act impatient. For older students and adults, you can stretch this out. For younger students, keep it short. See my note of CAUTION.

**CAUTION:** For K-1 and sometimes grade 2, it is best to keep this very short. The kindergarteners, especially, become very nervous and most do not often understand the point of this activity. Often, I will just skip the foreign directions for K-1 and just show them the table-setting jig. I might say "Can you understand what to do by looking at this picture, even if I do not tell you?" Help as much as possible until the child is successful. Praise the student and have everyone clap. Let it be fun.

Eventually, with older students, pull out the table-setting jig and show it to the student, laying it on the desk. If he is still confused, point to each of the shapes and indicate which item belongs there. Usually the student gets this immediately and will place the plate, cup, etc, on their outlines. Praise the student and have the class applaud. Ask the student why he did not follow directions when you told him what to do; didn't he hear what you said? Then explain that there are people who can hear all the words, but cannot make sense out of what is being said, just like it was a foreign language. Ask questions like, "Did you know you were supposed to do something? How did you feel when you couldn't understand what to do? You did a great job, finally, of setting the table...but how did you know what to do?" Draw attention again to the visual cue.

Hold up the table-setting jig and ask the rest of the class if they would have understood what to do when they saw it. Talk about how some children who may not always understand what is being said, can understand a lot if they can see drawing, outlines, or pictures. They can understand more if they can SEE what to do, instead of just listening. Depending on the grade level, during this discussion you might introduce the terms "language comprehension", "auditory processing", and "visual learning".

Talk about different styles of learning and how some children learn best when they listen, others when they can read, others when they do things, etc. This serves as a nice lead-in to the introduction to the special class.

If you are just doing the Generic Program, you can stop here. Answer questions about what has happened during the program and conclude by reminding them about how everyone is different, and how everyone is the same. Talk about being unique. If you are going to get more specific, continue with option B or C.

#### B (OPTION): Introduction to a special class and its members

With parent's permission, mention the students in the special class. This can be accomplished by bringing in large framed pictures of each child (from their parents) or with a slide show you have prepared ahead of time. At this time, share several pieces of information, briefly, about each child. They are:

- \* How many brothers or sisters he or she has.
- \* What he is interested in, skilled at, or other unique quality.
- \* Something he likes to do (or favorite toy, food, etc...)
- \* Something he is learning how to do.
- \* And... A suggestion about how they might interact with him...something you know would capture his interest...or that he would respond to...

While you are giving the above information, you can ask for responses that demonstrate what is the same between them and the child you are describing. For example, say "Raise your hand if you have two sisters, too..." or "Raise your hand if you love chocolate ice cream, too".

Answer questions, if they come up, about each child. Emphasize the positive and the uniqueness. Remind them how everyone is different; and everyone is the same.

#### C (OPTION): Understanding about a specific classmate

Typically, if the peer with autism has Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism, he or she will probably spend much of the day in the general education classroom. When this is the case, and when it is third grade or higher, I usually present *The Sixth Sense* by Carol Gray. It is an excellent way to help students and teachers learn about autism and its effects on social understanding, specifically, our perspective-taking ability. A complete lesson plan on how to present *The Sixth Sense* is included in the booklet *Taming the Recess Jungle*, by Carol Gray, published by Future Horizons. This program is also very effective with groups of adults, such as staff meetings and parent groups.

For more information about talking about autism and your child, see the appropriate chapters in the book, *What Does It Mean to Me?* by Catherine Faherty, published by Future Horizons. [OASIS Note: This book is available through the OASIS bookstore , which links to amazon.com, and/or Future Horizons.]

## CHILDREN'S BOOKS:

At the end of the program, or another time, it is often helpful to read a children's book to the class that deals with the issues of differences, uniqueness, autism, and other related other concepts. I have found that if the peer with autism has Asperger Syndrome or is high functioning, it is nice to end the program with a reading of *Albert Einstein* by Ibi Lepscky. My current favorite to read to classes when the child may be less verbal and have more overtly autistic behavior, is *Ian's Walk* by Laurie Lears.

There are many other excellent children's books dealing with differences, some which mention the term autism, others which do not. [OASIS Note: The OASIS bookstore has a complete list.]

## Understanding Friends Supply List and Description of Experiential Activities

For a group of 25-30 students

Here is a description of four different centers you can use. I recommend that you choose only three of the following at any one time, to keep the program within a realistic time-frame (45-60 minutes).

### Fine Motor Activity

8 pairs of large cloth garden gloves

8 sets of shoestrings and beads, each in a small tub

8 sets of hardware (nut, bolt, washer), each in a small tub

Table with 8 chairs

Each child wears the gloves and tries to string beads and assemble hardware.

Hint: For K-1 students, have them just wear one glove and use large beads.

### Visual Activity

8 pairs of safety goggles

Jar of petroleum jelly (to smear on lenses of goggles) or sandpaper to scratch lens

8 pencils and pads of lined paper

Books at grade level

Table with 8 chairs

Each child wear goggles (with obstructed view because of petroleum jelly or scratched lenses). Try to write sentences on the lines and read the print in a book.

Hint: Do not let children take off goggles until they are done.

### Perceptual and Sensory (Tactile) Activities

Roll of masking tape and binoculars:

Place a length of tape on the floor and have children walk on the line. Have each child hold the binoculars on their eyes, backwards. This causes perception to be distorted.

Several strips of yarn, 4-feet in length:

Have child jump rope using the yarn, instead of a rope. This causes the feeling of distorted perception of the weight of the "rope".

Garden glove with Velcro sewn on to inside of fingers and palm; and

A large handful of lambs-wool or a feather duster:

You wear the scratchy glove and hold the soft feathers or wool. While children are participating in the above activities, walk by and touch a bare arm. Simulates unpredictable sensation on the skin (either too scratchy or uncomfortably soft!)

Attention and Sensory (Auditory) Activity

8 pairs of headphones hooked up to a Listening Station

Cassette tape of static-noise or noisy crowd sounds

Worksheets at slightly higher grade level - requires concentration

8 pencils

Table with 8 chairs

Students wear headphones and have to listen to noises in their ears. They must complete the worksheets within a given time. Simulates difficulty focusing on work while not being able to filter out distractions.

© Catherine Faherty, Asheville TEACCH