



# FRIENDSHIPS: *Building a Good Life*

Strategies for  
Families of Children  
with Disabilities  
and their Peers,  
Communities,  
& Schools

## **AUTHORS:**

Parent Advisory Council for the PEAL Center  
PA Developmental Disabilities Grant  
Inclusive Education: Parent Leadership in Education



*This publication is supported by  
a grant from the Pennsylvania  
Developmental Disabilities Council.*



Copyright © 2017 The PEAL Center and the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council. Permission to reprint, copy and distribute this work is granted provided that it is reproduced as a whole, distributed at no more than actual cost, and displays this copyright notice. Any other reproduction is strictly prohibited.

# FRIENDSHIPS: Building a Good Life

*Strategies for Families of Children with Disabilities and their Peers, Communities, & Schools*

## **AUTHORS & CONTRIBUTORS**

Parent Advisory Council for the PEAL Center  
PA Developmental Disabilities Grant  
Inclusive Education: Parent Leadership in Education

### **Cecelia Lauris Belasco, MS Ed**

Cecelia is a retired special educator, a sibling, and the parent of 4 adults, one of whom has Down syndrome. She is past Board President and past Director of Training for the PEAL Center.

### **Dionna Rojas Orta**

Dionna has over 20 years experience in the Human Services field in the Pittsburgh area. She is the mother of 3 children including a son on the spectrum. She is the Your Child Your Choice Coordinator for the PEAL Center.

### **Tricia Shelton, EdD**

Tricia has been an early childhood educator for 17 years, first as a teacher in grades one through three and later serving as a principal. She currently works as a teacher educator with Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Tricia is the mother of a teenage son with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### **April Tucker**

April is the proud mother of Hailey who attends the Children’s Institute in Pittsburgh. Hailey has multiple diagnoses, most notable of which is her happy outgoing, engaging personality. April is dedicated to providing Hailey with the support she needs to fully participate in her community.

## **TABLE of CONTENTS**

Section 1: The Value of Friendships .....	2
Section 2: Why Is Friendship Development Important for Children with Disabilities? .....	3
Section 3: Who Benefits from Friendship Development?.....	4
Section 4: Barriers to Friendship Development .....	7
Section 5: Importance of Active Friendship Facilitation.....	9
Section 6: Strategies For Friendship Facilitation.....	10
1. Shared Activities.....	12
2. Shared Interests.....	14
3. Valued Roles for All.....	16
4. Share Information about Each Other .....	18
5. Just Enough Support from Adults .....	20
6. Reflection .....	22
Resources .....	23
References.....	25



# THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIPS

*“The good life is built with good relationships.”*

Robert Waldinger,  
Harvard Study of Adult Development.  
Lessons from the longest study on happiness, TED Talk,  
December 2015

Although we may identify wealth, fame and high achievement as the hallmarks of a happy and successful life, it is the establishment and maintenance of strong relationships that determines our current and future happiness and well-being. On the opposite end of the spectrum, isolation and a lack of close relationships can result in poor health and debilitating loneliness. A lack of relationships also can lead to depression, anxiety and poor performance in school and in the workplace (Cacioppo, 2013).



It is clear that as humans we are hardwired for belonging and community (Pitonyak, 2014). Babies, toddlers and children seek the company, approval and attention of others. This longing for acceptance and belonging is what unites us as humans. This feeling is universal and is not based on education levels, race, culture or any

other defining characteristics. When asked what makes our life meaningful, we often reflect on the connections we have made with others. We are grateful for the friends and family in our lives and cannot imagine life without their fellowship and support.

Children with disabilities are not excluded from this basic need to belong and be connected. However, they often find themselves socially isolated because of physical, communication and attitudinal barriers—as well as the very real barrier of stigma. It is not surprising that parents and family members of children with disabilities express concern about the development of friendships and relationships for their children (O’Brien & O’Brien, 1993). The need for friendship development is a common topic discussed at IEP meetings and in parent support groups. Parents are often painfully aware of their child’s isolation and their need for connections within their neighborhood, school and community, but they often feel ill equipped to remedy the situation. It is evident that intentional actions must be taken to facilitate the development of friendships for children with disabilities.





## SECTION 2

# WHY IS FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES?

The development of relationships and friendships is a quality-of-life issue. All lives are enriched by relationships and interdependence, and the lives of children with disabilities are no different. They can and should experience the beauty of relationships and friendships.

Inclusion in the community and friendship-building is hard work. It is not only children who can benefit from friendship development or the effort needed to facilitate friendships. We all should be concerned with friendship development within our schools and communities.

- ✓ *Friends make us feel accepted, valued and provide a sense of belonging.*
- ✓ *Friends provide support for our emotional, physical well-being.*
- ✓ *Friends validate and support us as a person outside our family circle.*
- ✓ *Friends offer a sense of companionship and membership.*
- ✓ *Friends provide models for our behaviors and adherence to environmental norms.*
- ✓ *Friends provide safety across environments. When we are valued and well known in our community, others are watching out for us.*

Friendships make our lives meaningful. For students with significant support needs—such as mobility, cognitive, social or communication needs—there may be a need to facilitate the development of friendships (Schaffner & Buswell, 1992). Mere physical proximity to others does not ensure the development of relationships or friendships.



# WHO BENEFITS FROM FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

## EVERYONE!

Friendship development for children with disabilities is important and beneficial to the individual, their parents, siblings, peers, schools and communities.

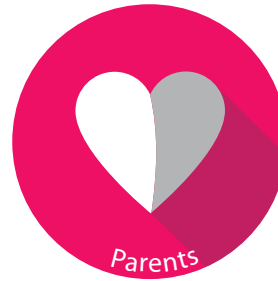
All humans need relationships and human contact. Friendships are critical for all.



### Friendship Development is important to THE CHILD

The goals and expectations of children with disabilities are the same as all children. Their needs are not exceptional but are very typical of other children. They need to belong, communicate, connect and participate in all that life offers. What may differ, however, is the level of support they need to accomplish the same outcomes and goals.

The mere presence of children with disabilities in an environment does not equate with full membership or participation. Intentional efforts must be made to ensure that interactions can occur. Children must begin now to learn about relationships to prepare for the possibility of positive, personal romantic relationships later.



### Friendship Development is important to PARENTS

Parents want to see their child valued within their community like they are within the safety and love of the family. Parents are concerned about the emotional well-being of their children and work each day to improve their ability to function and succeed in the real world. The presence of friends and relationships in their child's life validates the parent's innate belief that their son or daughter is a valued member of society.

Parents want to know their child will be supported and included by their community when they are adults. They want them to be respected, valued and supported in their adult lives. If parents want that to happen, they must begin to build that early. They can't wait until their children are young adults or for society to be "ready" for them.

Families can be a model of inclusion and adaptations for the world. Parents see their children as whole, just the way they are. Without any formal training, they naturally adapt their actions, communications, routines and more to ensure the success of their children. They actively work each day to make sure their children are active participants in daily life. Parents want others in schools and communities to also see and value their son or daughter and to actively work with them on these same outcomes.

*Students who were successful adults . . . demonstrated a high degree of empathy and acceptance of differences . . .*



## Friendship Development is important to SIBLINGS

Siblings are the first peers to spend extended time together, and they see their sibling as a valued person. Like their parents, they want others to see their sib in the same way. They are often on guard for people who do not know their sib as they do. They are affected by negative comments or interactions with their brother or sister. They fear that their sibling will be dismissed, mistreated or seen as inferior. Like their parents, they see their brother or sister as “typical,” and they want the world to see them the same way.



In their day-to-day life, they participate in common activities and naturally make the needed adaptations in communication and activity levels. They act as untrained “facilitators” daily.



## Friendship Development is important to PEERS

A recent study by Princeton University (2015) looked at the long-term outcomes for a group of more than 800 young people in their 20s. Twenty years ago, when this group was attending Kindergarten, they were tested and rated by their teachers. The students who were most successful and respected as adults were not necessarily students who scored high on academic predictors during Kindergarten testing. The students who were successful adults 20 years later had demonstrated a high degree of empathy and acceptance of differences during their early school years. This study illustrates how it is essential that all children learn empathy, understanding and the value of diversity. Teaching social skills to children at an early age is beneficial to all.



## WHO BENEFITS FROM FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT?



### Friendship Development is important to **TEACHERS** and **SUPPORT PERSONNEL**

The creation of a strong and positive school culture is critical to learning. A school culture where all are welcomed, valued and protected is an environment where children can learn.

“What is essential is invisible to the eye” is a quote from *The Little Prince*, a favorite book of Fred Rogers. Mr. Rogers firmly believed that “It’s through relationships that we grow best and learn best” (Li, 2016). By addressing friendship development for all children, schools can create environments where all are safe and welcome regardless of differences. By creating environments where all are emotionally safe, teachers can create spaces where true learning can happen.



### Friendship Development is important to **COMMUNITIES** and **SOCIETY**

Friendship development helps to build the communities we want all of our children to experience. We want a world where all are accepted and, by virtue of their birth, are seen as part of the whole. We want a place where differences are embraced and understood—not just tolerated and accepted.

Friendship development for children with disabilities creates a future world where, as adults, their peers become their employers, support personnel, doctors, neighbors and friends. Children with disabilities become adults who are seen as equal participants in recreation and leisure activities and active community members with the support needed to navigate in their adult world.

People who grow up together and share experiences together become adults who are comfortable and welcoming when encountering diversity in their communities and work places. We all need to work to create a community and society that is welcoming for all. We want to live in a world that values the individual gifts of all.



*Take a moment to consider future friendships your child may have with others. Try to not place limitations on your child’s future friendships based upon their abilities. Instead, consider your child’s strengths and interests. Then, create a picture in your mind.*

- *What do those friendships look like?*
- *Where are they occurring?*
- *How might those friendships grow and develop over time?*



## BARRIERS TO FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Although those supporting children with disabilities agree on the importance of building friendships, many barriers challenge their efforts. According to respected international disability rights activists Norman Kunc and Emma Van der Klift, the most significant barriers preventing individuals with labels of disability from fully participating in schools and communities are still attitudinal. Kunc and Van der Klift note the greatest barriers to the building of relationships and friendships are fear, ignorance and prejudice of the non-disabled (1994). The mere presence of a disabled person can make people nervous.



Another significant barrier surrounds society's judgments regarding what constitutes friendship and also who is capable of developing, appreciating and maintaining friendships. Differences in communication can sometimes cause others to feel uncomfortable and unapproachable (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1993). Judgments are made that prejudice efforts to communicate.

Providing accommodations and adaptations needed for participation can sometimes feel like a barrier. There can be a hesitation associated with the feeling that a child "can't do that" when with a little thought and effort there are indeed many ways the child could participate.

Children with significant needs are often seen and described in "medical" terms and we need to help each other to present a more "personal" description that emphasizes our likenesses. By describing children with medical terms we create a sense of mystery and fear making others feel unsure about how to approach one another. Others will hesitate to interact because they lack an understanding about a specific diagnosis or have misconceptions about disability.

Some children do not attend the same school as their neighbors or siblings. They have limited opportunities to meet or engage in activities with same age peers who live near their home. They may even attend cyber school where there is limited exposure to other children. Access to common activities and locations is also complicated by the busy schedules of today's families.



## BARRIERS TO FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The term “dignity of risk” is applicable to our thinking about friendship development. This term was first coined around the issue of care for people with intellectual disabilities in the 1970’s by Robert Perske, a disability scholar. In our efforts to “protect, comfort, keep safe, take care and watch” we can in fact prevent the “individual from experiencing risk that is essential for normal growth and development” (Perske, 1972). Most of us take friendships for granted but for children with disabilities this may involve taking risks. We must expose our children to both success and failure when it comes to experiencing life.

We must not allow our own anxieties to create a barrier for our child’s opportunities to fully experience life. We must help others experience time with our children so they can come to know them as we do.

Lack of time spent on friendship facilitation and development for children with disabilities leads to missed opportunities and isolation for our children. We must raise the awareness of parents, siblings, peers, teachers and support personnel and, communities and society to the importance of active friendship facilitation.



*We all have a lifetime of experiences upon which we form opinions. Consider your own experiences interacting with people who have disabilities.*

*What were those experiences like? Were they positive? Negative?*

*Could your past experiences (or lack of experiences) interacting with people who have disabilities be affecting your ability to imagine friendships for your child? Could others have had experiences that were similar to yours?*

*How can we all help each other re-imagine what it is like to have friends and be friends with those who have disabilities?*

# IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE FRIENDSHIP FACILITATION

There are many barriers to making friendships happen “naturally”. The development of friendships need support and facilitation.

**Friendship development and facilitation may need to be intentional.** See sidebar, Intentional Friendship Facilitation.

## WHO can be a facilitator?

Anyone can act as a facilitator. Anyone who cares about children with disabilities can facilitate friendships. Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and support personnel, communities, and society can help children with disabilities make meaningful connections with their same age peers and neighbors. It takes effort and a belief in the importance of creating a meaningful life for all.

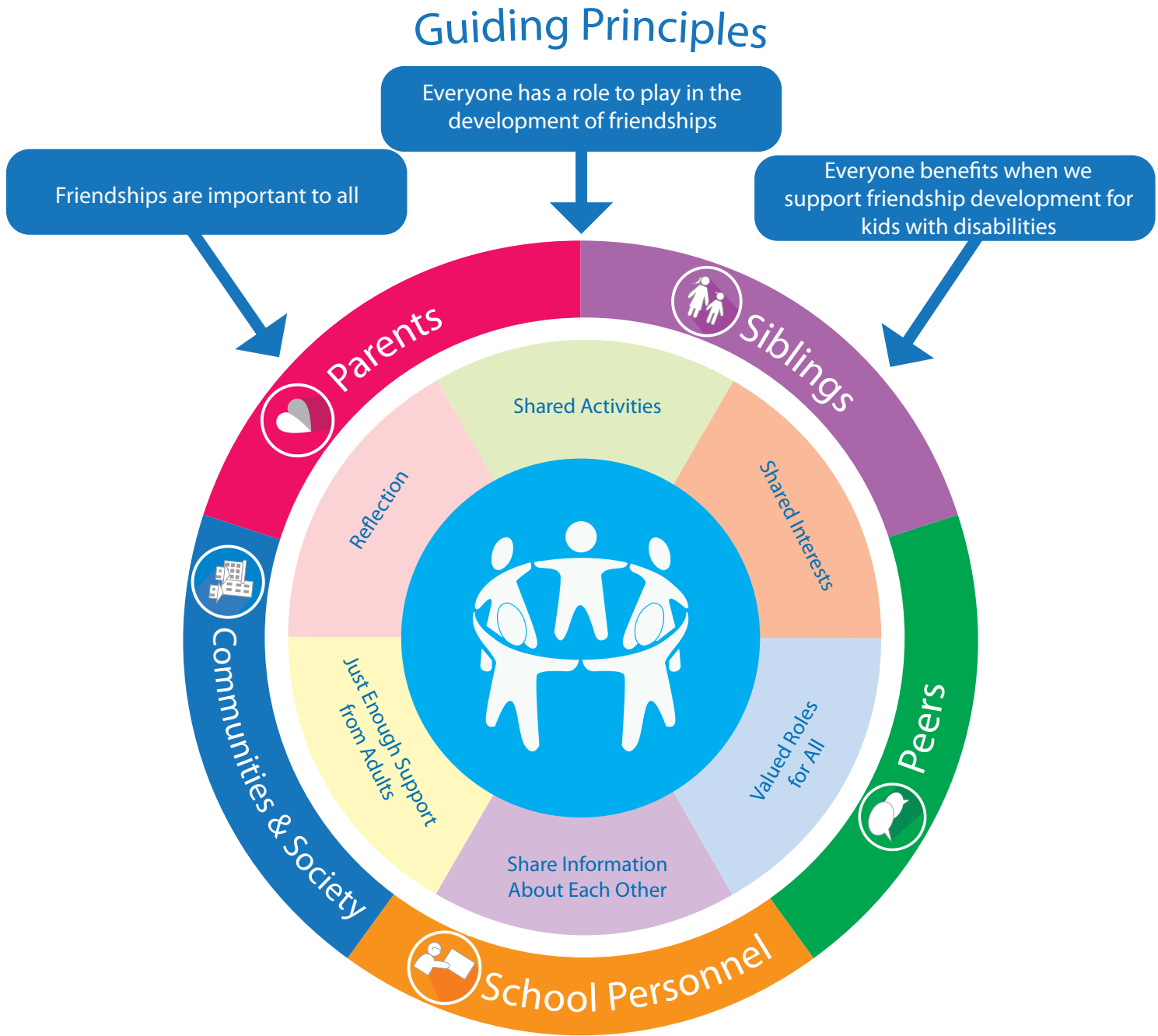
! Jot down a list of ‘allies,’ individuals in your child’s life who share the same vision of friendship for all children



### Intentional Friendship Facilitation

- ✓ Supports the development of friendships and creates success and comfort for all
- ✓ Provides the “structure” or “foundation” on which to build commonalities and respect differences
- ✓ Breaks down attitudinal barriers by providing opportunities and support for positive interactions
- ✓ Provides others with the knowledge and/or skills to support connections and relationships
- ✓ Provides opportunities for all to participate in the same activities together
- ✓ Provides opportunities to explore common interests
- ✓ Provides information regarding support/adaptations needed for all to fully participate
- ✓ Provides “positive interpretations” to support communication, participation, and points out common interests
- ✓ Provides opportunities across a variety of environments
- ✓ Incorporates technologies, equipment, and supports needed for participation, mobility, and communication
- ✓ Opens the door for questions. Information can increase comfort for all!
- ✓ Can preplan and set up the environment for success for all
- ✓ Can enhance communication among all participants
- ✓ Can dissipate misunderstandings and misconceptions about disability
- ✓ Can invite people in who may hesitate and hold back due to their discomfort

# STRATEGIES FOR FRIENDSHIP FACILITATION





Six “elements” are key to maximizing efforts to support the friendship development between students with and without disabilities.

There is no set formula for friendship development for students with disabilities. However, Erik Carter, Ph.D., of Vanderbilt University notes six key elements that appear repeatedly in research related to friendships and children with disabilities (2013). These include:

E  
L  
E  
M  
E  
N  
T  
S

1. Shared Activities
2. Shared Interests
3. Valued Roles for All
4. Share Information About Each Other
5. Just Enough Support from Adults
6. Reflection

More information about these elements is available from Erik Carter's webinar series, "Starting Points and Possibilities in Developing Natural Peer Support Programs - Important Elements," archived on the PATTAN website at <http://bit.ly/2lj1bb>.

**Attention to these elements can guide your efforts in friendship facilitation.** Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, support personnel, the community and society at large can actively work together to address these elements to maximize their efforts in support of friendship development between students with and without disabilities.





**ELEMENT 1: SHARED ACTIVITIES** *(same activities, same time, same place)*

This element is essential to provide maximum opportunities for friendship development. Carter expands this element by asking a simple question: “Are students/children engaged in the same activities at the same time and in the same place as all students and peers?”

Given the different skill levels and interests of children, it is important to consider adaptations and modifications so children can participate in the same activity at the same time in the same place. These may take shape in different ways, but they will still facilitate friendship.

For example, think of water table play where peers are washing baby dolls and a child with a disability is playing in the water and watching it run through his fingers. Using the water table side by side but for different purposes assists in building skills. These types of interactions can scaffold more advanced forms of play. The child with a disability may pick up the doll and begin to wash the doll in imitation of his peers.

It is very important to think about ways in which multiple levels of play/work can be represented at the same time, in the same place and within the same activity. Think of a club or activity on the middle school or high school level. Within any gathering or activity for the club/team/band/organization/activity there are a multitude of people and skills needed to complete the goals or objectives of the group.

**What PARENTS can do:**

1. Provide information and support to identify needed adaptations and modifications to ensure the maximum participation of all the children within an activity.
2. Provide needed transportation to and from activities outside of the school activities. This is especially important if the child is not in their local school.
3. Invite others to join in activities such as movies, sporting activities, parties, community parades, the library or classes.
4. Make sure your home and yard are welcoming to all kids. Make sure there are a variety of activities available that would attract other children to want to come to your home or yard to play.
5. Ask parents of the kids you invite to identify their child’s favorite or preferred activity and arrange the play date around that activity, applying any adaptations or modifications that your child might need.
6. Explore community activities where other children might gather. Some examples include museums, playgrounds, children's theater, and scheduled community parades, among others. Check websites and resources in the appendix.

**What SIBLINGS can do:**

1. Sibs can observe their sibling with a disability in the community and identify areas where there are opportunities for shared activities. Is there a community event – like a football game, pep rally or school groups that regularly meet – that will be attended by other students in the same age range as their sibling?
2. Teach your sibling the latest game or computer app so that they have the same understanding and language for what is popular among their peers.
3. Invite your friends to your home and share activities with your sibling so that others can come to know your sibling.

## What PEERS can do:



1. Identify where the “action” is within the school. Ask peers to identify the common activities, locations, times and where all students hang out.
2. Participate in IEP meetings or planning meetings to provide input regarding the best places for students to get together.
3. Be brave! If there is a fellow student you observe who may appear isolated within the school setting, in a social situation or in your neighborhood take the first step and approach them. Be the person who opens the door for them to participate in the same activities, at the same time, in the same place. You can be a role model for your friends and you can make a big difference in the life of another person.
4. Share creative solutions that can be made to have the individuals with a disability attend the event in a meaningful way. For example, everyone is going skateboarding and the child with the disability has not mastered the art of skateboarding. Siblings or peers can brainstorm ways to ensure meaningful participation. Can the child be the “judge” and score the different jumps or moves? This way the child develops the same vocabulary and can interact with his/her peers around this activity.



## What TEACHERS and SUPPORT PERSONNEL can do:



1. Examine, as a staff, their current school practices regarding opportunities for students to genuinely share activities. Do some students change classes at times before or after other students? Is there a “special” lunch table for students receiving special education services? Are these “special” circumstances hindering friendship development?
2. Ensure that all students have a chance to answer and ask questions within classes and activities.
3. Think about group activities and how to create universal instruction that allows all to participate in a meaningful way.
4. Ensure that students needing/using assistive devices have them available at all times to guarantee their maximum participation. Ask support staff to provide training and information on devices to increase ease of use.

## What COMMUNITIES and SOCIETY can do:



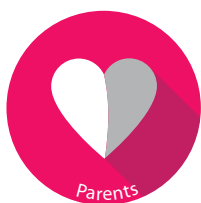
1. Provide a range of activities across a variety of interests, skills and ages.
2. Ensure that staff is aware of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the protections it provides for the participation of all community members in activities open to the general public.
3. Seek input from representatives within the disability community when designing areas and activities for community participation.
4. Members of community groups—and society in general—should examine their belief systems regarding the place of people with disabilities in society.

## ELEMENT 2: SHARED INTERESTS

Our interests are what typically draw us to join a group or club, participate in a community activity or attend an event. Oftentimes our first encounters with friends occur at parties, classes or other shared activities. Sharing information about common interests creates opportunities to identify “same places, same times and same activities” for participation. An interest in a topic or activity ensures sustained participation and allows repeated chances to spend time and have conversations together.

Think about how the current interests of the student can be shaped into something shared by peers. For example: How can you transform a love for Sesame Street into something that can be shared with others? Maybe it’s the songs. Or maybe it’s discussing the shapes or numbers. What element makes the characters fun? Is it the mascot in the costume? Can that interest be transferred to mascots at a sporting event? Or working on the school musical?

### What PARENTS can do:



1. Ask school staff if other students have similar interests as their son or daughter. They can share information on what they have observed as an interest or skill in their child.
2. Clearly articulate their vision regarding their son’s or daughter’s participation in activities or clubs.
3. Review their son’s or daughter’s IEP with the team to ensure they are being given the same opportunities as all to participate in clubs, classes and activities as others who share their specific interests and skills.
4. Allow staff to share contact information with other families whose children may be interested in joining your son or daughter in an activity.
5. Attend kid-friendly activities your child likes and you will find other children with similar interests.
6. Strike up conversations with other parents in attendance and “invite” others into your circle.
7. “Include” yourself in the life of the school so that you are part of the school and familiar with the activities and people involved.
8. Use an “about me” sheet at IEP meetings to help others get to know your child, as a person first, with the same basic needs and goals as others. An “about me” sheet offers others a brief personalized glimpse of your child.
9. Understand that children separated from their peers in special classes may have fewer opportunities to interact with their typically developing peers.



### What **SIBLINGS** can do:



1. Sibs often know their brother or sister well and can identify the activities and clubs that may be of interest to their sibling. They also can identify where in school or the community those interests might be explored and how to sign up or join.
2. Introduce, teach and practice skills with their sibling that may be of interest to same-age peers. Examples include video games, use of mobile apps, age-appropriate TV shows or movies, sports, sports figures, musical instruments, current music and performers.
3. Provide support and “positive interpretation” of their sib. They know what their sibling enjoys, dislikes, and how they express themselves. They can offer information and assist in communication when others are unsure of the messages being conveyed.

### What **PEERS** can do:



1. Invite their classmates to participate in groups or clubs of shared interests. They can act as the liaison with their peers who may feel uncomfortable in the presence of a person with a disability.
2. Help to identify what accommodations might be needed for maximum participation.
3. Provide introductions to fellow club members.
4. Provide “positive interpretation” by way of an introduction. Example: Introduce their peer and add details about what she/he has in common with the others in the group. “Hey, this is Bill. He’s in biology class with me and he loves to play the drums.”

### What **TEACHERS and SUPPORT PERSONNEL** can do:



1. Survey students about their interests in school activities, hobbies, music, technology, exercise, favorite classes and sports.
2. If there are other students with similar interests, offer information on how the students could explore those shared interests. Are there clubs or community events? Explore the possibility of the parents sharing contact information.
3. Help to develop relationships by modeling “positive interpretation.”
4. Be aware of environmental arrangements that might send the wrong message Example: teacher between student with a disability and a peer. Peers should be seated next to one another.
5. Be aware of students who naturally interact with one another. Ensure they have adequate opportunities to spend time together on assignments, projects, cooperative learning groups or clubs. Children cannot be “assigned” to become friends, but friendships may develop around a shared interest or a comfort with one another.

### What **COMMUNITIES and SOCIETY** can do:



1. Be aware that the interests of children with disabilities most likely mirror that of the general population.
2. When planning activities, adhere to the principles of universal design, which ensures many ways to access the same activity.
3. Understand that beliefs about people with disabilities should be examined. As a society we must presume that all people are capable of developing friendships (O’Brien & O’Brien, 1993).

## ELEMENT 3: VALUED ROLES FOR ALL

According to Canadian disability activists Norman Kunc and Emma Van der Klift, there are messages within the helping/helped relationship. We are trying to foster relationships based on respect and acceptance – not on a perception of deficiency. Always being the helped implies a certain vulnerability and helplessness.

Kunc and Van der Klift warn that we must learn to LISTEN to the person and be aware of their thoughts and goals. Don't assume you know what the person needs or wants. Don't assume they always need support or help.

The guiding principle is to presume competence; that way there can be no harm done. The person's roles should not be based on perceived skills or preconceived notions about a specific disability label. Demonstrate through your words and actions your belief in the inherent value of all humans.

### What PARENTS can do:



1. Share the strengths and primary interests of your child. Parents are the closest to their child and hold the vision of what makes their child's life meaningful now and in the future. Activities and experiences of today are building that future.
2. Parents are important models of how to interact with the child with a disability. Siblings will look toward this model of interaction. Do you encourage your children to play together or just to help their sibling?
3. Share the thoughts of Rosemary Crossley, Australian educator and developer of Facilitated Communication, who is often quoted as saying, "Not being able to speak is not the same as not having anything to say." All children communicate but that communication is not always in the form of verbal speech. Observations of the child's movements, facial expressions, eye movements, and vocalizations can provide valuable information about the child's likes, dislikes or interests.

### What SIBLINGS can do:



1. Are you always in a helping role? How can you set up ways for your sibling to help you or play in a way that establishes common ground?
2. Look for outside resources like sibling groups, which can help you find ways to interact with your sibling in different ways. Exposure to how other family models work can help you to best determine the type of relationship you will have.
3. It also is helpful to gain skills about how to provide guidance to others on how to interact with your sibling. It is better to provide information rather than shutting out people who may not have much knowledge.
4. Model ways of interacting with your sibling that demonstrate respect for their communication style, age, and value as a person. Show people that your sibling is not a "baby" in a grownup body.

### What PEERS can do:



1. Presume competence and advocate for others to do the same.
2. Ask respected adults and family members about the best ways to provide natural support to highlight and show off the skills of the child.
3. Attend meetings and trainings for school-established groups, such as peer mentoring and peer-support groups.
4. Be a peer leader and act as a role model within the school setting by engaging in positive interactions with all students. You can create systemic change within the school culture by your actions. Peers often look to each other for guidance and can impact positively on the school culture (Flanagan, 2016).



## What TEACHERS and SUPPORT PERSONNEL can do:



1. Teachers create the culture in a classroom. Students look to them to determine how to treat one another. Teachers can model respectful interactions with all students.
2. Model that one should never assume that a student is waiting to be “helped”, but rather ask each student if assistance is needed prior to rushing in to provide support.
3. Presume competence in all students and model that as common practice in the classroom.
4. Look for ways in which all students can assume a leadership role in the classroom. Example: Students can teach each other sign language or learn about electronic communication devices. In younger classes, rotate classroom jobs to ensure that all students are given a chance to assume the more desirable tasks, adapting the tasks to address the needs of individual.
5. During cooperative learning groups, rotate the roles within the groups when working on projects. Provide needed adaptations or supports for all students to assume leadership roles.



## What COMMUNITIES and SOCIETY can do:



1. Make sure the composition of boards, committees and panels is representative of the population as a whole, including those with disabilities.
2. When questions arise about issues related to disability within the community, seek out answers from the “experts” — those living with disabilities themselves.
3. Review the *10 Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities*, which were originally developed by the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. The 10 Commandments can be found on a variety of disability-related websites, including [ucp.org](http://ucp.org) under Explore Resources > Disability Etiquette.
4. Ensure that all employees, including those with disabilities, have opportunities to interact with all children in your community activities.
5. Highlight the valued roles people with disabilities have in their communities.

## ELEMENT 4: SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT EACH OTHER

The greatest “handicap” for those with disabilities continues to be attitudinal. People can be uncomfortable and avoid contact with those who are unfamiliar due to fear. This fear can take the shape of hurtful comments, avoidance or negative actions. Be proactive rather than reactive about these types of interaction. Be prepared to provide information in a non-confrontational way in order to raise awareness of the possibilities of an inclusive society.

### What PARENTS can do:



1. Share with other parents that you are working to find friends and activities for your child. They might be looking for friendships as well.
2. Share information with the people in your child’s life regarding their disability, their preferred means of communication, their interests, their family, their hopes and dreams and what makes them comfortable in a new situation.
3. Model the behavior and communication you use to ensure your child is included in family activities. Understanding communication preferences increases the comfort level of all.
4. Maintain the focus on strengths and likenesses.
5. Provide positive feedback by smiling and welcoming those who approach you and your child.
6. Share information on how your family routinely adapts to situations, conversations and events to maximize the participation of all family members.
7. Develop a clearly defined vision of your child’s future. This dream should be a reflection of your child’s hopes and goals in life. Articulate that vision to all that come into contact with you and your child so that they can join you in achieving those goals.
8. Visit Supporting Families at <http://supportstofamilies.org/> for tools and other supports that can help parents create good lives for their children with disabilities. Share those tools with those on the team that supports your child.

### What SIBLINGS can do:



1. Make sure your friends and classmates see how to effectively communicate respectfully with your sibling.
2. Model the behavior you hope to see in others when interacting with your sibling.
3. Provide examples of how your sibling expresses interest in something or how effective adaptations and accommodations can be in maximizing their participation and enjoyment.
4. Offer thoughts to facilitate the meaning of communication attempts and interpret actions of your sibling.
5. Don’t be put off by inquiring stares from others. Smile and offer to start a conversation.



### What PEERS can do:



1. It can feel uncomfortable approaching a person who is different from you. Start by just saying “Hi!”
2. Ask trusted adults or siblings of the child, respectful questions about the child’s preferred means of communication and interaction style or about information on a specific disability. Each child is an individual. Each person is unique regardless of a shared “diagnosis”.
3. Talk to your peers about your interests, activities, classes and your family. Reflect on the commonalities shared among same-age peers.
4. Be aware that your need for companionship, fellowship and belonging is shared by ALL of your peers regardless of communication styles, physical differences or support needs.

### What TEACHERS and SUPPORT PERSONNEL can do:



1. Schools must create a culture where all are welcome.
2. Staff must be given training regarding different disabilities and the educational and emotional needs of all students. Training and administrative leadership in creating a positive school environment provide benefits for all learners in the schools.
3. Seek information from families regarding the specific needs of students, both academically and socially.
4. Equip peers with the knowledge, information, training and skills to provide natural supports to others in both academic and social settings.
5. Include information and books on disabilities in required reading lists.
6. Include books in the school library about children living with disabilities.
7. Ask disability organizations to provide informational sessions on specific disabilities.

### What COMMUNITIES and SOCIETY can do:



1. Consult with adults with disabilities regarding recommended films that show disabilities in a positive light. Offer these films as part of the schedule of films for community nights.
2. Ask families and disability advocates for recommendations of children’s books to be included in your local library. These books should represent children and people with disabilities as members of schools, communities and families.

## ELEMENT 5: JUST ENOUGH SUPPORT FROM ADULTS

Beware of overprotection on the part of parents, staff and anyone who supports or interacts with children with disabilities. Fear of failure, criticism and bullying can create barriers to experiences, participation and full membership in one's community. The questions "what if people think he shouldn't be there?" and "what if he can't do it the same way?" should be replaced with "what can be done to ensure that my child experiences a full life like everyone else?" or "what if he doesn't get a chance to reach for his dreams and hopes?"

### What PARENTS can do:



1. Allow your child to participate in community activities of all kinds. There can be a certain amount of risk and anxiety about participation in activities that are not designed specifically for students with disabilities. It is worth the risk. Your child will learn something and so will his/her peers!
2. Be ready to share information on adaptations and accommodations that would maximize your son or daughter's participation.
3. Actively advocate for your son's or daughter's participation in a class, group, club or event. Be aware of other advocates who can help.
4. Your child may be on a developmental level and presents with "skills" that are on a "younger" level on the developmental scale but you should not lower your expectations for the life outcomes for your child. Higher support needs does not mean lowered expectations for the quality of life for your child. Have high expectations for yourself and your child.
5. Teach your child self-advocacy skills so they can help others understand their needs and wants. This is a critical skill at all stages of life.

### What SIBLINGS can do:



1. Provide parents with feedback on their worries about the value of taking risks.
2. Role play with his or her sibling at home to practice rules, roles and routines needed within particular settings.
3. Encourage others to rely on peers or siblings to provide support for their sibling, instead of paid adults.
4. Model how best to support their sibling in the least intrusive ways.

### What PEERS can do:



1. Work in groups for cooperative learning and project-based learning.
2. Provide feedback for peers on appropriate social and behavioral norms for a wide variety of settings.
3. Feedback and modeling from peers can be more effective than information from adults.
4. Talk directly to your peer. Do not talk to the support person as a way to have a conversation with your peer. Make eye contact with your peer and direct your conversation to your peer. The adult is there to support, but not be the primary person in the conversation.



## What **TEACHERS** and **SUPPORT PERSONNEL** can do:



1. Allow students to provide support and assistance to one another prior to adults intervening.
2. Provide multiple opportunities for students to support one another. There are classrooms where the students are told to ask for the assistance of two peers prior to asking the adults in the room.
3. Provide information and teaching on social skills that are usable for all in the adult world.
4. Teach students how to communicate effectively and respectfully with peers and how to resolve differences.
5. Observe more than act. Observe what is needed. Offer thoughts to facilitate the meaning of communication attempts and interpret actions.
6. Make sure the adults do not stand in the way between the child and their peers. Students who are supported by an adult should not become a separate unit within the classroom.



## What **COMMUNITIES** and **SOCIETY** can do:



1. Be open to the participation of all children in the activities offered in your neighborhood or community.
2. Brainstorm solutions to issues or questions of access or participation. Consult with organizations or parents of children with disabilities to find the answers.
3. Change the dialogue! The question should never begin with "Why. . ." but instead "How can we. . .?"
4. Resist the temptation to create "special activities" for "special people." Rather, create opportunities for all people within the community to come together.



## ELEMENT 6: REFLECTIONS

It is essential for people who care about friendships for all students to pause periodically to reflect on their current practices and beliefs. Has there been any change in relationships among the children? Is there a more positive culture within the family, school and community? Are there any educational practices that could provide more opportunities for interactions and sharing of common interests?

### What PARENTS can do:



1. Use the IEP meeting to review with the team (including your child, same-age peers, siblings and teachers) the importance of friendships and your child's place within the school community.
2. Share successes and challenges and ask for the team's collaboration in strategizing for success.
3. Honestly assess your own beliefs or practices regarding friendship facilitation and make changes to meet the needs and goals of your child.

### What SIBLINGS can do:



1. Talk with or observe your sibling and get feedback on how they feel their relationships with peers are going.
2. Think carefully about what may or may not be working to ensure that your sibling is able to have maximum opportunities to develop friendships.
3. Be part of the team that examines how things are going and provide honest and open input into the process.

### What PEERS can do:



1. Observe your peers for signs that they value the importance of friendship for all.
2. Check your own thoughts and actions when it comes to friendship development with your peers. Are there peers who are always left out? Is there anyone who steps in to intervene?
3. Observe how your school environment reflects or does not reflect a positive welcome culture for all.

### What TEACHERS and SUPPORT PERSONNEL can do:



1. Talk with other staff to fully examine beliefs and practices of friendship facilitation within the school culture.
2. Is there an organized effort to ensure that all are welcome and valued in the school?
3. Are there policies, practices or demands that create barriers to friendship development?

### What COMMUNITIES and SOCIETY can do:



1. Ask your group or organization if you are adapting to the needs of all the children in your community. Are you asking children with disabilities to conform to your set policies or practices?
2. Ask yourself if your policies and practices value all your citizens and create an atmosphere and culture of welcome.

# RESOURCES

## [FriendshipCircle.org](http://FriendshipCircle.org)

The Friendship Circle International—under “locations” enter the name of your state.

## [InclusionProject.org](http://InclusionProject.org)

The National Inclusion Project serves to bridge the gap that exists between young people with disabilities and the world around them. Their on line resource on “Power in Friendship” offers a “toolbox” on a variety of topics including ideas on how to host an inclusive birthday party and games all kids can play.

## [InclusionU.com](http://InclusionU.com)

Inclusion University is dedicated to supporting teachers, administrators and families to realize inclusive practices for all students with disabilities.

## [InclusiveSchooling.com](http://InclusiveSchooling.com)

Inclusive Schooling is an engaging community for educators, administrators and parents who seek to create more inclusive schools.

## [KITOnline.org](http://KITOnline.org)

Kids Included Together is a national non-profit organization that offers training and information on inclusion. KIT provides best practices training to help communities, businesses, and child care & recreation programs include children with all kinds of disabilities and special needs. They offer a blended-learning approach that combines live, on-site training and online learning and resources.

**FaceBook Page:** Kids Included Together

## [KidsTogether.org](http://KidsTogether.org)

The mission of Kids Together is to promote inclusive communities where all people belong. This organization works to remove barriers that exclude people with disabilities. They support the belief that children with disabilities, like all children, have the need to be welcomed, cherished and embraced in our communities. This website has a wealth of ideas and resources to promote communities and schools where all are welcome. Explore the tabs and you’ll find ideas to share such as The 10 Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities.

**FaceBook Page:** Kids Together, Inc.

## [LifeCourseTools.com](http://LifeCourseTools.com)

These tools are found on “Supporttofamilies” and they guide families of all ages and all abilities through a planning process to develop a good life for their son or daughter. Their core belief is People with disabilities and their families have the right to live, love, work, play and pursue their life aspirations as others do in their community.

## [Mass.gov](http://Mass.gov)

Search for “Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Disability Resource Guide” 2014 Edition (Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) and Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services (MDDS) 2014).

## [MikaylasVoice.org](http://MikaylasVoice.org)

Visit this website to learn more about the book and the movement, Mikayla’s Voice. The book, Mikayla’s Voice, has been donated to every elementary school library in PA. Go to YouTube “Mikayla’s Voice” to see a video of Mikayla and her sister and their beliefs in the value of friendships.

## [SiblingLeadership.org](http://SiblingLeadership.org)

Siblings can find a wealth of resources and information regarding leadership training or opportunities for connecting with other siblings.

## [SupportsToFamilies.org](http://SupportsToFamilies.org)

Tools, videos, and other information that help parents create good lives for their children with disabilities.

## [SWIFTSchools.org](http://SWIFTSchools.org)

SWIFT Schools (School Wide Integrated Framework for Transformation) is a national K-8 technical assistance center that builds school capacity to provide academic and behavioral support to improve outcomes for all students through equity-based inclusion. The SWIFT schools believe they can transform education so that it benefits each and every student, their families, and ultimately the communities in which they live. Their work is research based and offers great promise and resources for schools, families and communities nationwide.

**FaceBook Page:** SWIFT Schools

### [TheInclusiveClass.com](http://TheInclusiveClass.com)

This online blog offers ideas, strategies and resources for both teachers and families.

**FaceBook Page:** The Inclusive Class

### [UCP.org](http://UCP.org)

United Cerebral Palsy—Home > Explore Resources > Disability Etiquette: *Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities* (Originally published by Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)).

## WEBSITES TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

[AccessiblePlayground.net](http://AccessiblePlayground.net): Search the Directory for an accessible playground near you.

[TrailLink.com](http://TrailLink.com): Enter your City, State and Zip for a listing of trails to explore near you.

[AccessibleNature.info/?page\\_id=395](http://AccessibleNature.info/?page_id=395): Explore this site for lists of parks and trails across PA that are ADA accessible.

[Kidsburgh.org](http://Kidsburgh.org): Click on events and a calendar of kids events will appear.

[Meetup.com](http://Meetup.com): Social site to find others with similar interests/ needs.

## OTHER WAYS TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

**Public Library in your community:** Look for a calendar of events for kids. You'll meet some families from your area and start the conversation about common interests and activities.

**Miracle League (Western PA):** Parents will meet other parents and kids who like to play softball.

**Kindermusik:** Meet other parents and kids who enjoy movement and music.

**Gymkhana Gymnastics:** Kids can participate in gymnastics while parents can meet other parents.

**Your school's PTA or PTO: Include yourself in the life of your child's school. You'll meet the parents of the kids in your community.**

**Support Groups:** Search online and on FaceBook for Support Groups that are disability specific.

# REFERENCES

Cacioppo, J. (2013, September). The lethality of loneliness [TEDxDesMoines]. Retrieved from [https://youtu.be/\\_OhxI03JoA0](https://youtu.be/_OhxI03JoA0).

Carter, E. (2013, November & December). Starting points and possibilities promoting inclusion learning and relationships for students with complex needs [PATTAN Webinars, Video resources, Training Series, 5 Videos]. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2lj1bb>.

Flanagan, L. (2016, January 20)., How Empowering Influential Kids Can Change School Culture for the Better [Blogpost KQED News/MindShift How we will learn]. Retrieved from <http://ww2.kqed.org>.

Jones, D., Greenberg, M., Crowley, M. (2015, November). Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness [American Journal of Public Health Research Article]. Retrieved from <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630>.

Kunc, N., Van der Klift, E. (1994) Hell-bent on helping: Benevolence, friendship, and the politics of help. [Article]. Retrieved from <http://www.broadreachtraining.com/articles/arhellbe.htm>. Originally published in: Thousand, J., Villa, R., Nevin, A. (1994). Creativity and collaborative learning: A practical guide to empowering students and teachers. Baltimore: Paul Brookes, © Copyright 1994 Paul H. Brookes Publishers.

O'Brien, C. & O'Brien, J. (1993). Unlikely alliances, friendship & people with developmental disabilities. [Publication of Responsive Systems Associates, Perspectives on Community Building]. Retrieved from <http://thechp.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Unlikely-Alliances-Friendship-People-with-Developmental-Disabilities.pdf>.

Perske, R. (1972). The dignity of risk and the mentally retarded. [Research published in Mental Retardation 10: 24-27]. Cited by Slayter Recevik, E. (2014, February 12). Twinkies for breakfast: Implementing the dignity of risk with adults with intellectual disabilities [Blogpost]. Retrieved from <https://blog.disabilityinfo.org/?p=3928>.

Pitonyak, D. (2014, January). The importance of belonging, [Publication] Retrieved from <http://www.imagine.com>.

Rogers, F., as cited by Li, Julie (2016, January 6). The simple human interactions that make learning possible [Blogpost]. Retrieved from <http://remakelearning.org/blog/2016/01/06/the-simple-human-interactions-that-make-learning-possible/>.

Schaffner, B. and Barbara Buswell, B. Connecting students: A guide to thoughtful friendship facilitation for educators and families, PEAK Parent Center, Inc., 1992.

Snell, M., Janney, R. The teachers guides to inclusive practices, social relationships and peer support. Baltimore: Paul Brookes, 2000.

Waldinger, R. (2015, December). Harvard Study of Adult Development. Lessons from the longest study on happiness, [TED Talk]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_waldinger\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_good\\_life\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_longest\\_study\\_on\\_happiness?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en).





### **The PEAL Center**

Toll Free: 866-950-1040 • [PEALCenter.org](http://PEALCenter.org) • [facebook.com/PEALCenter](https://facebook.com/PEALCenter)  
2325 E Carson Street, Suite 100A, Pittsburgh, PA 15203 • 412-281-4404  
520 N Christopher Columbus Blvd, Suite 602, Philadelphia, PA 19123 • 215-567-6143

*February, 2017*