



*Improving knowledge for those affected by Down syndrome*

## **Friendly Observations for People with Down Syndrome**

**By Karen Gaffney**

I think one of the most important aspects in everyday life is the importance of friendships. Friends can really help you when you need them the most. If you want to have friends in your life, have a smile on your face for them. Make them feel included in what it is that you are doing. You will make huge difference in their lives if you do that. There are many social activities that friends can do together; go bowling, to the movies, laser tag, have lunch together, or get together for coffee somewhere. They can ask someone to go to a football game, go to the beach with, or just hang out with them for fun.

Advice I have for parents is to encourage your child to reach out to others, to call them by name. Also, encourage them to ask another friend or student to have lunch with them, or play with them outside for recess.

It is really important that you help maintain and keep a healthy and safe friendship with someone. You want to hold on to this friendship by asking other people to hang out with them. Parents can help their children play with others who are at their child's age. Help your child come up with positive ways and solutions on how to keep their friendship safe with others. Maybe their friends can help your child make the right choices around the school yard.

For young teens and adults with Down syndrome, I encourage you all to include everyone with or without a disability, into any social activity that you have going on in your school. We all want to be treated the same way as everyone else. Respect is important. You should respect people, even though people may look a little different than everyone else. Remember, we are all the same as everyone else. Don't let other people look at us differently. We are unique; we are all special in every way imaginable. We are all PEOPLE FIRST.

If you have a smile for others, extend your hand to them, and call out their name on the other side of the hallway, give them attention, you will be making a huge difference in their lives. It will brighten up their day for them. It will make others feel good. Give them a hug once in a while, pat them on the back, or give them a word of encouragement. It is very important to reach out to others, ask to sit next to them at lunch time, or study hall, or say "hey come and sit with us." That will really make them feel good, and they will try to do the same thing back.

Everyone is meant to feel loved by their friends, and they will do the same thing back to you. Don't judge people any differently. We want to be the same as everyone else. Give them positive feedback when they do something well. Stand by them when they make mistakes. Give them high fives, when you ask them to do something for you. You will be a positive role model for others when they see that you are trying to help them out.

There is a new program I am working on at the Karen Gaffney Foundation. It is called the Friends First Network. It is a club for all students. We are working with schools to get this program started. Students with disabilities team up with students without disabilities. They come together, form a club, and they work together on social services projects. In the process, they will all learn more about each other, and what it takes to just be a friend. It is my dream to have a network of Friends First clubs all around the country all making a difference every single day.

If you want more information about this program, please contact me at the Karen Gaffney Foundation. Our phone number is (503) 973-5130 or e-mail me at [kgaffney@teleport.com](mailto:kgaffney@teleport.com). I hope you will find this encouraging and helpful!