

Friendship and Peer Acceptance

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Students with TBI have difficulty maintaining friendships. This is one of the most common and devastating consequences of significant brain injury. The resulting social isolation compounds feelings of loss, sadness and depression in students with TBI.

CAUSES

Childhood and adolescence are challenging social worlds to navigate in the best of times. TBI is scary; in a single moment a friend's life has changed forever. Damage to the brain has potentially left them limited physically, mentally and emotionally. Few children or adolescents have the mental or emotional resources to process the implications for their own sense of stability and safety in the world and struggle to maintain a friendship with the affected person.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ISSUE

Loss of old friends may be largely inevitable. Watching a friend recover from any significant loss, even without long-term disability is beyond the social and emotional capabilities of most adolescents and children. It's important to help students with TBI understand that their old friends aren't rejecting them as much as they are running away from ideas too big and scary to handle. However, many adolescents and children are capable of developing new reciprocal friendships with people of any ability.

SOLUTION

Help students with TBI maintain what friendships they can and replace those that will inevitably end by providing structures of support.

STRATEGIES

Prepare peers

Before the student with TBI returns to your classroom, prepare the rest of your class for what to expect.

- Consult with the student's parents about what to say and, if possible, have the family be part of the presentation.
- Keep the details specific to the student and the accommodations the student will have (note-taker, rest periods, etc.).
- If you know the student has significant challenges in social competence, (impulse control, ability to read situations or the emotions of others, etc.) explain them as a result of the brain injury and suggest strategies peers can use to accommodate the injured student.

Peer volunteers

Use peer volunteers to help the student with TBI and also provide valuable social interaction.

- Peer volunteers can help the student navigate busy corridors, carry book and materials and complete assignments.
- Peer volunteers should be selected from a social set acceptable to the student with brain injury.
- True friendships are reciprocal; both volunteers and students with brain injury need to be prepared to both give and receive in their interactions.

Schedules

Use schedules to promote social interaction. Sometimes students spend significant parts of the school day separated from their peers. Keep students in situations that promote positive social

interaction, as much as possible.

Example: If it is not absolutely necessary, don't remove the student with TBI from mainstream classes. Instead, put accommodations in place in the regular classroom.

Build new friendships

Help students build new friendships by creating opportunities for your student to interact with new people, students who are new to the school or just students from other social groups.

Example: A former athlete can do speech therapy as part of choir practice and get to know a whole new group of friends.

NOTES: