

## Friend 2 Friend Programs: Demystifying Autism – Puppet Program



### What to expect:

This show is about Friendship. This 60 minute program includes an introduction about the plan for the time together, a puppet play, a review of what the puppets learned, and a “pass the puppet” circle. In the puppet play, Crystal wants to play with Freddie, and does not understand why Freddie, who has ASD, does some of the things he does. Freddie, her friend Angela, and her two teachers educate her about ASD, stims, communication, and friendship. We discuss strengths and challenges of all people and tips for being friends with anyone. Students then have an opportunity to take what they learned in the puppet show and try it with small puppets. Maximum of 50 students.

### The need to bridge a social void:

There is often a social void between autistic children and their typically developing peers. Since children begin to make social comparisons between the ages of seven and nine (Rubin, 2002), it is natural for them to have questions and concerns about differences they see between themselves and their classmates. The purpose of the Friend 2 Friend program is to give children accurate information about autism (what we call “demystification”) in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner and to foster mutually beneficial friendships between children on the spectrum and their peers. Our larger goal is to promote full social inclusion of *all* children. Creating a truly inclusive school culture is to create a collaborative identity within the school where everyone regards themselves and others as different, and regards different as the norm (Gest, Graham-Bermann, & Hartup, 2001).

### Learning Objectives of the Friend 2 Friend Program:

The inclusive model of this program was designed to promote empathy for autistic individuals by modeling, labeling, explaining, and normalizing the characteristics of autism, while never singling out the individual who may be participating in the program, and if a child self-identifies, they are supported by our staff. Normalizing characteristics of autism provides participants with an opportunity for emotional perspective-taking. The sense of identifying with an individual on the spectrum shifts the typically developing perspective beyond simply understanding and accepting to feelings of empathy (not sympathy). In turn, empathy translates into prosocial behaviors. Prosocial communication is the basis for fostering mutual friendships between autistic individuals and their peers.



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