



Who Needs Friends?: A Guide to The Friends Program, an Intervention Program that helps Young Children on the Autism Spectrum/Asperger's Disorder and their Parents explore and expand their social world

Laurie Leventhal-Belfer PhD

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Who Needs Friends? A Guide to The Friends Program: An intervention program that helps young children on the Autism Spectrum/ Asperger's Disorder and their Parents explore and expand their social world. For the past 15 years colleagues and graduate students have asked us if we have a handbook about our program that they could share with their trainees. Parents have also inquired about a handbook that they can share with family members and their children's teachers. So here it is, a reader friendly guidebook to The Friends Program. The program strives to replicate a preschool and elementary school setting to capture the challenges that these children experience at school, across social settings such as their home, and in after school activities. The program is unique in that the parents, experienced interpreters of their children's social world, attend every session. We learned early on that their observations and comments made during the parent's group provided the clinicians with insight that might otherwise take months to acquire. A parent immediately knew which movie or video their child was referring to during the table discussion. They understood why a child may look distressed at the start of a session or what they were eager to share in the group. The program runs on the academic calendar since we have learned that different issues arise at different times such as the opening of the school year, holidays, and tests. Our curriculum is not standardized but molds to fit the issues the children are currently raising, i.e., making new friends, keeping your cool, bullying, and collaboration. The goal of this program is to enhance a child's Social Communication, capacity for shared symbolic Play, understanding of Emotions and Emotional Regulation, verbal Communication and Sensory Regulation (SPECS). The book defines each area and elaborates on how these goals are addressed in different activity themes. Each activity has a theme, goal, and strategies that address the SPECS. The goal for the parents is to increase their understanding of their child, and provide a safe and supportive setting where they can openly share with the clinical facilitator and fellow parents the stages they travel as parents of children on the Autism Spectrum/ Asperger's Disorder. The journey involves stages of denial, anger and frustration, bargaining, sadness, advocacy, and acceptance. This journey does not travel a linear path but moves up and down in relationship to how their child is doing. The stages come to life with direct quotes from the parents along with a story written by a parent who was not aware of how we were going to present this process in our first book, *Asperger's Disorder in Young Children* (2004). Over time an increasing number of fathers are attending each session and that has provided a rich insight into the paths that couples travel. The group parents provide each other with ongoing support years after they leave the group, often sending us updates on the progress their child has made or their recent achievements as (for example) an Eagle Scout, in the martial arts, in the arts, or in their transition to college. The book contains the charts that we use in the group, a guide to children's books we use in our program, and a list of books for professionals and parents. Lastly we provide a review of our pilot outcome study, preliminary data, and a set of outcome measures. Nothing is more satisfying than watching a child who asked their parents and the staff at the start of the program, "who needs friends?", leave the program with a desire to maintain the friendships they made in the group and gradually expand their social world with a little nudge and lots of love from their parents.

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