

# Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

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## SNIPPET #15: Strengthening Peer Relationships in Out of School Time Programs

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs are valuable opportunities for all children to develop friendships because they can provide children with access to other kids, a wide range of play materials, and structured activities supervised by caring adults. Friendships are important in helping children develop emotionally, socially and academically. Children with friends have better attitudes about learning, more academic success, better self esteem, fewer social problems as adults, and a greater sense of well-being than students without friends. However, some school-age children struggle with joining in, taking turns, resolving conflict peacefully, listening, following directions or showing kindness to their peers. These self-regulatory and social behaviors are foundational skills for children to be able to make and keep friends.

### **Why Do Some Kids Struggle to Make Friends?**

Developing positive peer relationships can be challenging to some children for a variety of reasons. Children who are struggling to make friends may have lacked early experiences and opportunities for developing healthy peer relationships, they may have

been exposed to trauma or harmful levels of stress, or they may have certain disabilities that make understanding complex social skills difficult.

### **What Can OST Staff Do?**

Many children benefit from direct instruction and opportunities to practice social skills in a safe, caring environment. The way programs are structured and the supports and activities provided have an impact on how children develop social skills and how they build friendships. You can set the tone for a safe community for kids to build friendships with the following strategies.

### ***Dedicate Program Time to Community Building***

Holding daily class meetings can be helpful for creating a calm, cooperative environment. Consider holding a daily meeting composed of four parts:

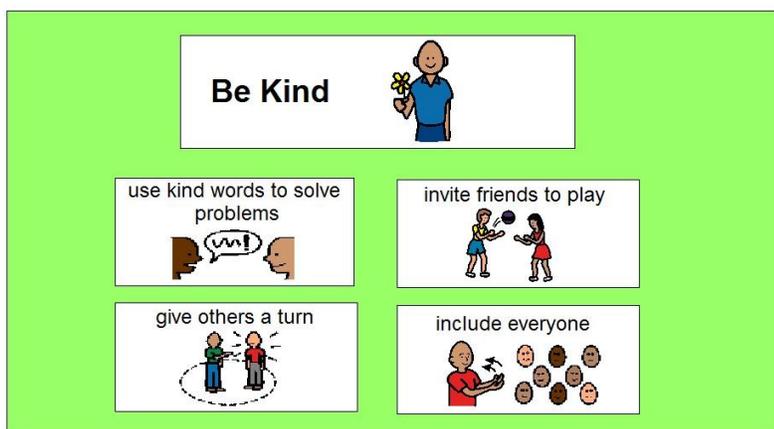
1. **Greetings** that give children an opportunity to welcome each other by name.
2. **Sharing** that encourages children to value the opinions of others while learning to articulate their own thoughts.

3. **A fun activity** that encourages cooperation rather than competition.

4. **News and announcements** that ensure children know about the daily schedule and any changes that may take place.

### ***Set Clear Expectations and Reinforce Them***

When staff create an environment where students know that positive social behavior is expected and rewarded, children are more likely to develop positive peer relationships. OST staff members can provide explicit behavior expectations that include friendship behaviors and teach them in class. As a support, post these expectations where your class can see them and refer to them often. When children demonstrate the positive behaviors that you're trying to encourage, like sharing, acknowledge their success and reference what they did right. For example, you can say things like "Sarah, I noticed you sharing with Diego—great job!"

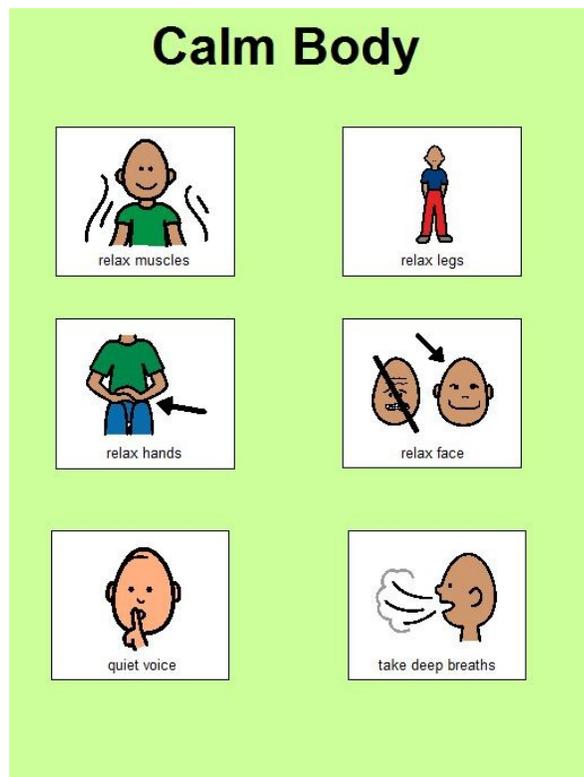


### ***Use Prompts and Reminders***

Once you've set clear expectations, giving students verbal and visual prompts and reminders often throughout the day helps set children up for successful interactions with their peers. This is especially important to do before activities that are challenging for your students such as transitions and unstructured free time.

### ***Break Skills Down***

Teaching friendship skills often means taking the abstract concepts that are involved in social interactions, and breaking them down into concrete steps. For example: You may encourage children to "be nice," but what does it actually mean to be nice? A broad concept like this can be broken down into a specific group of actions like smiling, inviting other children to play, giving compliments, sharing and taking turns. Even taking turns can be divided into skills like waiting, sharing, and following directions. Once broken down, these smaller actions can be taught, practiced and linked together over time as the students master them, to create friendship skills.



### ***Make It Meaningful and Fun***

Kids learn best when they understand the purpose of the skill they are learning and can practice it in real situations. In a lesson about using kind words with our peers, for example, if you are teaching how to give a compliment, explain that compliments are a way to let someone know that you like them and are a great way to make friends. Then follow up your lesson with opportunities for students to practice throughout the day with engaging activities like role-play and games.

### ***Plan to Practice***

When plotting out your schedule and curriculum, look for places throughout your day to imbed different types of friendship skills practice that appeal to multiple learning styles. Organizing a game of follow-the leader before transitioning in from recess, asking children to draw a picture of themselves sharing before beginning free choice, and giving a minute or two before a paired reading activity for the partners to share a story or a compliment with each other all create opportunities to practice budding skills as well as to build a safe community that values friendship.

OST programs have a unique opportunity to assist children who may be struggling to make friends. By dedicating specific time to community building, teaching social skills in an explicit way and establishing clear expectations for all students, OST programs can have a big impact on helping children develop positive peer relationships. These social skills, as well as the friendships formed by students in OST programs, will help children learn better, resolve conflict more effectively, and improve their self-esteem.