Establishing Friendships in Early Childhood Inclusive Settings

What Roles Do Parents and Teachers Play?

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Adult support of 12 specific friendship dyads involving 3- to 5-year-old children with and without developmental delays was investigated through semi-structured interviews with the children’s parents and teachers. Most respondents described these friendships as harmonious and important for the emotional benefits that these relationships provided children. Parents and teachers reported supporting the friendships through a variety of strategies, ranging from setting up the social environment to helping friends interact with each other and engaging in home-school communication on the topic of friendship. Findings also indicated that some of these strategies may have been implemented incidentally, rather than being intentionally focused on friendship support. Teachers reported giving information and being asked about or provided with information but did not report asking parents for information relating to specific friendships.

Keywords: social development; preschool inclusion; preschoolers; friendship

A growing number of preschool children with developmental delays (DD) throughout the United States have been enrolled in inclusive settings. Furthermore, states have been under increasing pressure as part of federal accountability standards to demonstrate yearly progress in serving even more young children with DD in inclusive programs. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2007), 36 of the 59 states and territories reported serving 50% or more of their preschoolers with DD in general education programs. Positive outcomes have been reported for young children with and without DD in these settings (see review by Odom et al., 2004). In particular, inclusion has been shown to be an important context for social development. Compared to segregated settings, inclusive settings have been associated with more interactions and with higher levels of play for children with DD (Odom et al., 2004). However, the social integration described by Guralnick (2001) as one of the goals of inclusion is more than increased social interactions and incorporates the development of meaningful relationships between children with and without DD. The recent joint position statement on early childhood inclusion by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) specifically noted friendships...
as one of the desired results of inclusive experiences (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Nevertheless, to date very few researchers have focused specifically on friendships in inclusive settings.

Friendships have been defined as voluntary and reciprocated relationships between two or more children who exhibit (a) mutual liking for and attachment to one another, (b) frequent proximity to one another and engagement in shared activities, and (c) evidence of enjoyment and positive affect (Buysse, Goldman, West, & Hollingsworth, 2008). Historically, more research has been conducted on the broader construct of children’s peer-related social competence than specifically on their friendships. Oftentimes, friendships have been included as one component of definitions of social competence, along with other components such as peer acceptance, or how well children are liked by their peers (Katz & McClellan, 1997). However, friendships in particular have appeared to be important in terms of children’s general adjustment and well-being and also as a context for their development of interaction skills that are important for success in school as well as later in life (Buysse et al., 2008; Costin & Jones, 1992; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine [NRCIM], 2000). Close friendships also may have facilitated the social acceptance and participation of some children with DD (Odom, Zercher, Li, Marquart, Sandall, & Brown, 2006), increased frequency of interactions (Vaughn, Colvin, Azria, Caya, & Krzysik, 2001), and more successful interactions (Guralnick, Gottman, & Hammond, 1996), particularly when friendships endure over time (Howes, 1983). Friendships of young children have been of interest because early friendships help children learn about establishing and maintaining relationships (NRCIM), and because children who show difficulties with peer relations early in life are at risk for social adjustment problems when they get older (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

Despite evidence indicating the importance of early friendships, only limited research focused on ways to help children promote and maintain friendships has been performed (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). Much of the research on friendships has been conducted with older school-aged children rather than preschoolers. Moreover, most past research on friendships has been conducted with children without DD (WO/DD; Buysse et al., 2008). Friendships of young children with DD in the context of inclusion are of particular interest because of the potential developmental benefits that may be associated with friendships (especially friendships involving one child with a disability and one child without DD; Guralnick & Groom, 1987). Inclusion provides opportunities for children with and without DD to interact and learn how to relate positively to others and those opportunities may be important precursors to forming friendships. However, compared to their peers without DD, children with DD appear to be at risk for poor peer-related social competence, fewer friends, and friendships that are shorter in duration (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002, 2003; Guralnick et al., 1996; Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007). Given these risks and the developmental importance of friendships, the study of early friendships involving children with and without DD is critical to increase our understanding of friendships and to explore strategies that can help young children develop and maintain positive social relationships.

Family members may have influenced children’s peer interactions through their beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about peer-related social competence, as well as through parent-child interactions and helping to develop their children’s peer social networks (e.g., by arranging contacts with peers, supervising play, and instructing their children how to play
with peers; Guralnick, 1999). Parent beliefs may have affected parent practices that in turn may affect children’s outcomes (e.g., mothers who believe in the importance of social competence tend to have socially competent children; Mills & Rubin, 1993). Empirical evidence has indicated that parents of children with and without DD believe in the importance of friendships for their children and that parents of preschoolers use a number of practices to support friendships (e.g., reading books on the topic of friendship, creating opportunities for peer contact, supervising children’s interactions, and coaching children in social situations; Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Rhodes, 2002). Existing research on teacher support of friendships has indicated that preschool teachers (a) believe children’s social-emotional competence is important (Kowalski, Petti-Frontczak, & Johnson, 2001) and (b) use some practices to promote friendships (e.g., use of friendship stories, puppets, and role-play activities; use of modeling, demonstrating, and prompting of social and play skills; and allowing children time to play together; Buysse et al., 2003; Sparkman, 2003). To date, researchers have not shown parent-teacher communication to be a commonly used strategy for promoting friendships among young children. However, this could be especially important for children with cognitive or communication difficulties who may not readily communicate with their parents about their friendships and shared interests (Buysse et al., 2003).

In summary, the literature on early peer relations has indicated that parents and teachers engage in a variety of practices to support young children’s peer socialization, and parents’ and teachers’ beliefs may be related to children’s social functioning. However, much of the research to date has examined peer-related social competence in general, with a primary focus on children WO/DD or, less frequently, on children with DD. Additional research is needed on the specific adult practices that support friendships (voluntary, reciprocal, relationships, as opposed to how well children are liked by peers in general). In particular, investigations concerning dyadic friendships in which one child has a DD and one child does not have a DD, and the continuity of parent and teacher practices used to facilitate those friendships is sorely needed.

The primary aim of our study was to describe parents’ and teachers’ beliefs and practices related to supporting established preschool friendships between children with DD and WO/DD: DD-WO/DD friendship dyads. The following research questions were addressed using qualitative methods:

1. How do parents and teachers describe the nature and importance of the DD-WO/DD friendships?
2. What strategies do parents and teachers use to facilitate the DD-WO/DD friendships?
3. What types of communication—if any—occur between parents and teachers about these friendships?

Investigating parents’ and teachers’ beliefs and practices related to friendships, including their communication with one another, makes the design of this study unique, as we know of no other studies that have provided a view of the roles of both parents and teachers in facilitating specific friendships.

Method

We employed semi-structured interview methodology to answer the research questions of our study because the approach allowed participants to provide detailed information with
open-ended responses to a consistent set of questions (Creswell, 2002; Davies, 1999). Detailed information about their beliefs, practices, and communications in support of reciprocal DD-WO/DD friendship dyads might have been difficult to obtain through direct observation (Creswell, 2002). Following the interviews, participants completed demographic questionnaires. We performed thematic analysis to examine parent and teacher responses relating to friendship support, and procedures for validating findings included independent coding and member checks. Our procedures are described further in the “Data Collection” section.

Participants

The participants in this study were parents and preschool teachers of children between the ages of 3 and 6 who were reported to be members of reciprocal DD-WO/DD friendship dyads. The parents and teachers of 12 dyads were recruited for a total of 36 participants: 12 teachers and 24 parents (i.e., the teacher, the parent of the child with DD, and the parent of the child WO/DD for each dyad).

Adult characteristics. All parents were mothers or fathers of the participating children with the exception of one child’s grandmother, who was the child’s legal guardian. Table 1 shows characteristics of parents and teachers.

Child characteristics. Participating children with DD and WO/DD were similar in age (DD: \( M = 58 \) months, \( SD = 8 \); WO/DD: \( M = 58, SD = 6 \)). Table 2 shows characteristics of participating children. As a group, the children WO/DD in our study were rated by teachers as exhibiting more social skills (\( M = 109, SD = 18, R = 68 \) to 130) and fewer problem behaviors (\( M = 100, SD = 15, R = 85 \) to 140) than the children with DD in the study.

### Table 1

Parent and Teacher Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>DD parents</th>
<th>WO/DD parents</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11 (92%)</td>
<td>11 (92%)</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>8 (67%)</td>
<td>7 (58%)</td>
<td>8 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest education level completeda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college/vocational school</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>7 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. \( n = 11 \); education level response was unclear on the questionnaire for one parent.
but mean standard scores for both groups fell within the average range (Social Skills Rating System [SSRS]; Gresham & Elliott, 1990b). The most common domain of delay for the children with DD was speech. Seven of the children with DD had a mild or moderate disability in communicating with others, according to teacher ratings on The ABILITIES Index (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1991). Other areas of difficulty teachers noted for several children included social skills, inappropriate behavior, understanding others, and intellectual functioning, though almost all disability ratings in these areas were mild or moderate.

**Dyad characteristics.** Most dyads were composed of two children of the same gender and ethnicity and within 1 month of age. According to parent and teacher responses to the question of how long these children had been friends, the friendships had endured for some time, though there was considerable variability in the reported length of specific friendships. In general, parents reported the children in these dyads had been friends for longer than teachers reported (teacher report: \( M = 13 \) months, \( SD = 7 \) months, \( n = 10 \) dyads; parents of children with DD: \( M = 15 \), \( SD = 8 \); parents of children WO/ DD: \( M = 17 \), \( SD = 7 \), \( n = 9 \)).
**Program characteristics.** The children in the friendship dyads attended 12 community-based inclusive childcare programs. Participating teachers worked at these North Carolina programs, and most were determined to be of high quality. Specifically, 10 of the 12 inclusive programs had a 4- or 5-star rating (5 being the highest rating in the state’s quality rating and improvement system).

**Recruitment.** We solicited programs based on their proximity and quality from a list of 3-, 4-, and 5-star programs in one geographic region within North Carolina, and other programs with which we were familiar. We recruited only one teacher per program because we believed teachers within a particular program were likely to have similar beliefs and employ similar practices with regard to supporting preschool friendships. Each teacher identified DD-WO/DD friendship dyads in her classroom and distributed letters about the study to the parents of the children in one DD-WO/DD dyad. Each participating parent and teacher received a $40 incentive following data collection.

**Selection of dyads.** The first author met individually with each teacher who consented to participate and asked her to identify any children with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in her classroom. She then asked the teacher to identify the special friends of each child with an IEP. In this meeting, she described special friends as children who liked to spend time together and enjoyed each other’s company and also emphasized that the friendship should be mutual with each child considering the other to be a friend. It should be noted that we did not require that each child consider the other to be his or her best friend. Teachers completed a form with friendship information including names, ages, and disability status of friends for each child with an IEP. On these forms, teachers listed between 0 and 4 special friends for each child with an IEP. In other words, teachers did appear to be selective in reporting friendship dyads; no teacher simply listed all of the children in her class as friends of each child with an IEP. The first DD-WO/DD friendship dyad listed on the form was selected, unless the teacher recommended a particular dyad (e.g., one teacher said a child in the first dyad listed was getting ready to move, and arranging an interview with the child’s parent might be difficult). If the chosen dyad did not meet the criteria for being included in the study, we selected the next friendship dyad. Criteria for being included in the study were that the children were between the ages of 3 and 6 and the parents of both members of the DD-WO/DD dyad (a) consented to participate, (b) were familiar with their child’s friend (identified by the teacher), and (c) considered that child to be one of their child’s friends. In accordance with methods described by Buysse et al. (2008), friendships were identified by teacher report followed by parent confirmation.

**Preschool solicitation.** Directors of 65 different childcare programs received a letter about the study and were then contacted by phone for permission to recruit teachers. More than 100 programs were contacted in all, but some did not have any preschool children with DD enrolled. Some directors of inclusive programs declined to provide the name of a teacher to contact, citing a variety of reasons (e.g., they were not interested in participating in a research study, their teachers were too busy, they were going through personnel transitions at the time). Several teachers expressed interest in our study but cited a variety of reasons for not participating (e.g., no children with IEPs were enrolled in their classrooms,
the children with DD enrolled in their classrooms did not have any special friendships, one or both parents of the children in the selected DD-WO/DD dyad chose not to participate. Nine additional teachers consented to participate but were not included because one or both parents of the children in the selected DD-WO/DD dyads did not wish to participate or did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., parent was not familiar with the friend the teacher had identified, parent said that because her child was nonverbal she could not confirm that the friend the teacher had identified was one of her child’s friends). All participants who met the criteria were included in this study. Recruitment efforts began in late winter and were discontinued in August because preschool students were beginning to move to different classrooms for the beginning of the new academic year.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with all adult participants. Initial interview questions focused on beliefs about the nature and importance of specific friendships. Open-ended questions were followed by probing questions that focused on practices to support specific friendships. Final interview questions centered on home-school communication about specific friendships. Table 3 provides a list of sample interview questions. We performed interviews during the latter half of the school year to allow teachers and friends several months at the beginning of the year to get to know one another and conducted the interviews in locations convenient for participants. Interviews lasted between 13 minutes and 1 hour, 28 minutes. Interviews with parents of children with DD generally took longer than interviews with parents of children WO/DD, and teacher interviews were typically even longer. All interviews were systematically recorded and transcribed.

Thematic Analysis

We employed an iterative interpretative process for reducing data, drawing conclusions, and verifying interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 2002). Initially, the first author read and re-read the interview transcripts, developing possible codes to identify common information as recommended by Creswell (2002). She then grouped similar codes under themes. Finally, she engaged in a consensus process with two other researchers on the final codes and major themes.

Although the codes developed were influenced by previous researchers’ work on friendships (e.g., Buysse et al., 2003; Rhodes, 2002; Sparkman, 2003), our initial coding efforts were open and flexible to allow additional codes or strategies beyond those delineated in the literature (Creswell, 2002; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). As codes were clarified and revised, interview transcripts were recoded with the revised codes. Individual codes were then grouped into thematic categories. The focus in our study was not on counting the frequency of responses (the method used for a content analysis) but on determining the meaning of parent and teacher responses relating to friendship support, consistent with methods used for a thematic analysis. Hence, results of the analysis are reported in terms of themes shared by, for example, the majority or a few participants (Skinner, Rodriguez, & Bailey, 1999).
Processes for validating findings. Whereas the lead researcher, who had extensive experience as a classroom practitioner, conducted initial coding, she held a series of regular meetings with the second author during the coding process. The primary purpose of these meetings was to engage in a process of validating the codes and major themes that related to the study research questions with multiple perspectives. During this consensus process, the second author, who is an experienced researcher with expertise in both early childhood inclusion and children’s friendships and peer relations, examined a sample of the data collected and offered advice for fine-tuning any categories that needed to be combined or disentangled. Each research question was analyzed separately and the second author examined five to nine transcripts (14% to 25% of the total number of transcripts) for each research question. In all, she reviewed portions of 23 (64%) different interview transcripts.

Table 3
Sample Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>How did [child] meet [friend]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What kinds of things do you see or hear that lets you know they are friends?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How long have they been friends?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How important do you think this friendship is for [child]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Open-ended question: Are there things that you do to help [child] and [friend] stay friends? What kinds of things do you do?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me more about [strategy named].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. How often do you do this?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Do you think [strategy] worked?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. How and why did you decide to do this?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. How did [child with DD]’s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probing question: Do you ever arrange times for [child] and [friend] to play together?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(follow-up questions a.-e. as above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probing question: Do you ever help [child] and [friend] play together by participating in the play yourself? (follow-up questions a.-e. as above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probing question: Do you ever help [child] and [friend] resolve conflicts while they play? (follow-up questions a.-e. as above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Do you communicate with [child]’s teacher/parents about [child]’s friendship with [friend]? If so,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. What types of things do you communicate about relating to this friendship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. How often do you communicate about this friendship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. How do you communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. What are the ways you prefer to communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. How satisfied are you with the communication with [child]’s teacher/parents about this friendship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If no communication,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Would you like to communicate with [child]’s teacher/parents about [child]’s friendship with [friend]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. (If yes) How would you prefer to communicate about this (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A third researcher, who is an experienced researcher with expertise in early intervention and qualitative methodology, independently coded a sample (14%) of the transcripts for the first research question analyzed using codes developed by the first and second authors and validated the coding for a sample (25%) of the transcripts for the remaining two research questions. Any disagreements in codes assigned were resolved through discussion and consensus. We then summarized the findings from the thematic analysis and mailed the summaries to relevant participants for their feedback. Seven participants responded to the member checks, and their comments indicated that the summary of findings generally reflected their beliefs and practices.

Results

Beliefs About the Nature and Importance of Preschool DD-WO/DD Friendships

The first broad theme describing parents’ and teachers’ beliefs about the nature of specific friendships emerged from participant responses related to the harmonious nature of these friendships. The second broad theme provided information about why parents believed friendships were important for their children. Responses from parents and teachers were similar and are reported together in the following sections.

Most friendships were harmonious. Most parents’ and teachers’ responses to questions about the nature of specific friendships indicated that the friendships were harmonious, largely characterized by positive play interactions. Following are selected descriptions of participants’ responses relating to this theme.

Almost all participants talked about the two friends talking with each other and engaging in active play together:

They like to get down and wrestle and do physical things together on the playground, like go down the slide a million times, and think it’s just a hoot. There’s a Connect 4 game that we have . . . and they’ll sit there and make patterns, and then they’ll push the little lever at the bottom and watch it all fall on the table, and they’ll just laugh and laugh, and they’ll do it over and over and over.

Some participants highlighted how well the friends played together. For example, the friends shared, listened, had few or no conflicts, resolved conflicts they did have, and got along with each other better than with others. Many parents and teachers described specific friends’ expressions of affection, positive affect, and enjoyment (e.g., the friends hugged, held hands, told each other that they loved one another, smiled, laughed, joked with each other). Parents and teachers also reported that specific friends talked about each other: “She always talks about him: Marquis did this; Marquis did that.” Teachers said these children asked where their friends were if absent, and parents said their children talked about what the friends did during the day (e.g., “He came home and was telling me how the party was . . . and how she dressed”). Participants also said children often called the friend their friend, best friend, or buddy. Specific friends were also reported to seek proximity with
each other: sat together at lunch, requested play dates or sleepovers with each other, and were always with each other (e.g., “Any kind of games we were playing, they were just side-by-side the whole time”). This teacher’s response described the friends’ play as well as their desire for proximity:

They’re inseparable. . . . [When] one chooses a center first, the other one’s always right there behind him making sure that they’re playing in the same center. And if they’re not, then they’re playing in the center next to one another, so they can see and still talk to one another.

Most parents and teachers indicated that specific friendships were characterized by commonalities in chronological ages, developmental ages (e.g., “I think Sam was young compared to the other kids, and Beren was developmentally young, so they were kind of drawn to each other”), genders, cultures, temperaments (e.g., “Both of them are very easygoing”), interaction styles, interests, or some combination of these characteristics. In addition, several parents and teachers suggested the friends were compatible in that they complemented each other or met each other’s needs (e.g., one child liked to act silly and his friend liked to laugh). A few participants described children WO/DD taking a mothering role in the relationships (e.g., “I’d have to say she’s nurturing over him and she looks out for him; encourages him to play a little bit more”).

Taken together, the characteristics described in this section paint a picture of harmonious relationships between friends. However, the friendships of four DD-WO/DD dyads were described by parents and teachers as inconsistent (e.g., “They’re like a tag team, off and on relationship”) or conflicted (e.g., “They had many, many conflicts”). Nonetheless, even friends who experienced conflict and inconsistency also played together at times.

Importance of friendships. Most parents and teachers in our study believed specific friendships to be “important” or “very important,” particularly for the children with DD. Only a few parents of children WO/DD said these friendships were not especially important, and some teachers said they were not especially important for the children WO/DD. A few parents said they did not know how important these friendships were for their children (e.g., “He doesn’t talk about her when he’s not at school and I don’t know if he thinks about her; with the autism, you just really don’t know what’s going on in his head”).

Consistent with Rhodes’ (2002) findings, participants discussed friendships as being important for the following reasons: (a) emotional resource, (b) learning about relationships, and (c) cognitive resource. Parents and teachers believed specific friendships to be important because they served as emotional resources for their children (e.g., “I think it just gives him confidence and helps him fit in. And he enjoys it. It’s fun for him.”). This reason was reported by more parents of children with DD than parents of children WO/DD. Respondents infrequently reported specific friendships as being important as a context for children’s learning about relationships (e.g., “Developing social skills with people that are not like herself”). Parents and teachers noted a lack of exposure to same-age peers outside of school as a further reason why these friendships were important for children’s learning about relationships. Only a few parents reported that specific friendships were important because they served as a cognitive resource for children (e.g., these friendships were important for children to learn and make developmental progress: “To help him in his learning”). Teachers gave the latter response only when asked about children with DD.
Practices Used to Support Preschool DD-WO/DD Friendships

Three broad themes described the practices parents and teachers reported using in support of specific friendships: (a) setting the tone of the social environment, (b) providing opportunities for dyadic interactions, and (c) facilitating dyadic interactions or play. Each theme is further described below.

Setting the tone of the social environment. Participants reported several general practices they used to support specific friendships. These general practices revealed parents’ and teachers’ thoughts about “setting the tone” of the social environment for their children. Typically, parents employed the general strategies with their own children. In contrast, teachers most often used the strategies with the whole class. Practices under this social environment theme included (a) supervising, (b) discussing friends and social skills, (c) talking about a specific friend, (d) greeting friends, and (e) bringing children to school.

Several parents and a majority of teachers reported engaging in passive supervision of the friends: “I would just keep an eye on them. They would be playing in the back yard and I’d look out the window to make sure that they were behaving and playing together nicely.” Participants also described talking to children about friends and about social behaviors and prosocial play skills in general (rather than with the dyad in particular). For example, they told children to (a) be kind, (b) share, (c) be polite, (d) cooperate, (e) be nice, (f) be helpful, (g) be honest, (h) avoid name-calling, and (i) treat others the way they want to be treated. Several parents reported talking with their children specifically about the friend in a friendship dyad (e.g., “When they were playing dress up for Noah’s Ark, I asked Graham: What did Paul dress up as?”). A few parents mentioned bringing their children to school and greeting friends as a strategy to support friendships (e.g., “If I go into the class, I just try to walk over and say hello to Andrew”).

The “setting the tone” theme also encompassed the following practices: (a) letting children choose their friends, (b) separating friends, (c) talking about all classmates being friends, and (d) requiring children to play with all classmates. Several teachers and a few parents noted letting children choose their friends or choose with whom they wanted to play: “I feel like they kind of work out who’s going to be their friends and who will not. I can’t choose those for her.” For teachers, part of letting children choose was providing free play time, allowing children to play together, and allowing friends to have a quiet space to play with each other. A few teachers reported separating friends when they were not getting along, when they were disruptive, or to get them used to playing with other children. Although rarely reported in response to initial open-ended questions about practices used with specific dyads, some teachers responded to probing questions with strategies that seemed to be more focused on all children in the same class getting along, rather than focused on friendship as a dyadic relationship (e.g., “We talk about everybody being friends,” and “I make everybody play with everybody. . . . As they change centers they have to change to a different center with a different child.”). Some of the above practices (e.g., separating friends) may not be considered to be practices facilitative of friendships. However, they have been included here because they were mentioned in response to questions about friendship practices, and they give an idea of the general and passive nature of some strategies used in support of specific friendships.
Whereas the above practices describing the social environment may be considered to be passive strategies that could help lay the foundation for friendship formation, most parents and all teachers also reported using more active strategies. The next two themes describe practices reflecting more intentionality and involvement on the part of parents and teachers, as well as a focus on the dyad.

*Providing opportunities for dyadic interactions.* Several strategies provided opportunities for the friends in specific friendship dyads to interact with each other: (a) arranging play dates, (b) placing friends in the same activities or locations, (c) planning favorite activities, and (d) encouraging the friendship in other ways. These practices were almost always used with the two friends together.

Parents arranged play dates for friendship dyads. Almost half of the DD-WO/DD dyads had played together at least once outside of the preschool setting (e.g., went to the movies, to a restaurant, or to each other’s homes), but only two dyads had play dates on a regular basis (e.g., once or twice a month), according to parent reports. In response to the open-ended questions about practices used, only one teacher reported sharing information specifically so that parents could arrange for the friends to play together outside of school. However, about half of the teachers in this study reported intentionally putting specific friends together for activities in the school setting (e.g., next to one another for group time, sitting together during stories, playing in the same centers). Strategies in this category included (a) assigning friends to be buddies, (b) placing friends in play areas where there were less likely to be conflicts over materials, (c) sending friends to play areas where only two children were allowed or to particular centers where certain types of play were likely to benefit children, and (d) asking the two friends which center they wanted to go to before the other children so that they could be in the same center before it filled up. Although this was a rare response, teachers also reported planning specific friends’ favorite activities: “I would do different activities that I knew they both liked such as art, drawing, painting.” Some participants provided more general encouragement for dyadic interactions (e.g., “[W]e . . . encourage him to continue playing with Luke,” “I [told] Graham that if he wants to invite Paul over to come play that he could do that”). The practices described above under the second theme provided opportunities for the friends to engage in dyadic interactions. The third and final theme describes responses focused on facilitating the friends’ dyadic interactions.

*Facilitating dyadic interactions or play.* A number of parents and teachers described active strategies that were focused on the DD-WO/DD dyad but went beyond merely getting the friends in proximity or in the same activity. These practices seemed to be aimed at facilitating positive interactions between specific friends. Strategies encompassed by this theme included (a) participating in friends’ play, (b) giving friends ideas about how or what to play, (c) resolving conflicts, (d) coaching friends’ use of social skills, (e) conversing with the dyad, and (f) interpreting for the child with special needs. Each strategy is further described below.

All teachers and several parents reported helping the friends play by participating in the play themselves (e.g., “I’ve played a lot of ball games with them”). One teacher noted her participation in pretend play: “I have been part of their housekeeping area. I have gotten...
married once in housekeeping, and Neal was the husband and Kelly was the priest.” Most teachers and a few parents of children with DD reported giving friends ideas about how or what to play. These encouragements included (a) suggesting specific activities (e.g., “Do you want to do a floor puzzle today?”), (b) redirecting children from inappropriate activities, and (c) recommending activities for children who were not engaged. Parents and teachers also described helping to resolve conflicts between friends: “When they have a disagreement we have them talk through things, and tell each other what they didn’t like, and how could they help each other make each other feel better.” Responses indicated that parents and teachers also coached friends in their use of social skills (e.g., “I would just say: You know, that is not how we play with our friends. We need to play nicely. We need to share.”). Some teachers and only a few parents of children with DD said they engaged the dyad in conversation or joined the friends’ conversation (e.g., asked them about or commented on their activities and interests inside and outside of the classroom). Teachers also mentioned interpreting the words or behaviors of children with DD for their friends: “I had to help him do a little bit of talking at first; explain to Chantay what he was trying to say to her . . . because some of his words wouldn’t come out.” However, this practice was rarely reported. Some of these practices (e.g., participating in friends’ play, giving friends ideas about how or what to play, and coaching friends’ use of social skills) were not commonly reported in response to the initial open-ended questions about practices used. However, these practices were reported by a majority of teachers and by several parents in response to follow-up probe questions.

### Parent-Teacher Communication About Preschool DD-WO/DD Friendships

Analysis of interview transcripts resulted in three themes related to parent-teacher communication that emerged from parent and teacher data: (a) teachers gave parents information relating to specific friendships, (b) parents asked for or gave teachers information relating to specific friendships, and (c) in some cases, barriers to communication and reasons for lack of communication existed. These themes are described below.

**Teachers gave parents information relating to specific friendships.** Teachers gave most parents information relating to specific friendships. In some cases, the teacher let parents know that the children in these dyads were friends: “[The teacher] . . . is the one that brought it to my attention that they’re friends.” Most teachers and about half of the parents indicated that teachers shared positive details about these friendships with parents, including how, what, and where the friends liked to play or did play during the day, as well as details about how close the friendship was:

I make sure that they know that they played together today, this is what went on, the way that they take up for each other. I keep the parents notified about what’s going on with both of them. Because they’ve done something really cute every day.

Responses under the parent-teacher communication theme also described messages about the friends helping or supporting each other (e.g., “I [told] David’s mother that Monique helps with David’s speech a lot, and she was very pleased to know that”). Finally,
some teachers reported giving parents information about conflicts between the friends and about how children resolved those conflicts.

Parents asked for or gave teachers information relating to specific friendships. Some parents talked about initiating requests for information from teachers and about sharing information with teachers about specific friendships. Most parents of children with DD reported asking for or giving teachers information regarding specific DD-WO/DD friendships, whereas only a few parents of children WO/DD described exchanging information about friendships with teachers.

Both parents and teachers reported that parents asked teachers how their children got along with others. Participants also said that parents asked teachers about what a specific friend said or did or about how they interacted (e.g., “His mom comes in and she wants to know: How’s David and Monique doing today?”). A few parents of children with DD and teachers reported that parents asked for or gave teachers information about play dates between the friends. In addition, parent descriptions indicated that parents asked teachers about conflicts involving the friends (e.g., “How often do they get in arguments with each other?”), and teacher reports showed that parents informed teachers that their children talked about friends at home (e.g., “Their mothers always say: You know, Jakim always talks about Dennis”).

Barriers to communication and reasons for lack of communication. This final communication theme reflects responses indicating that approximately half of the teachers and a few of the parents in our study chose not to communicate or had difficulty communicating with each other about specific friendships. A few parents reported that they did not ask teachers about this friendship because there were not any problems between the friends and, if problems arose, teachers let them know. Similarly, a few teachers said it was a classroom friendship or said the topic of friendship did not come up in their communication with parents (e.g., “Andrew’s parents never really asked us any questions about Andrew’s friendships”). Although this was an infrequent response, one specific barrier to communication noted by parents and teachers was the privacy policy of some preschools. For example, one parent of a child with DD described the privacy policy of her son’s childcare as a barrier to communication about his friends:

They’re very private about the kids. . . . For example, his speech therapist when she talks about when they do group sessions, she’ll just use the first initial, “Thomas is developing a friendship with S, a boy.” I don’t know who S is and I don’t know how to find out who S is . . .

Method of communication, involvement, and satisfaction level. The majority of parent and teacher participants in our study reported informal conversation as the most commonly used and preferred method for communicating with each other about specific friendships. According to parent report, parents of children with DD were more involved in homeschoo communication than parents of children WO/DD, especially in terms of frequency of communication and in terms of reporting at least some communication. On the other hand, teachers said they communicated about topics, in similar ways, and with the same frequency with both groups of parents. Indeed, some teachers commented that they
communicated about the same issues with parents (e.g., “I communicate with them the same way I do Jake’s. Everything is fair treatment.”). However, other teachers said they communicated more with parents of children with DD. One teacher appeared to be particularly attuned to the communication needs of a parent of a child with DD: “Daniel’s mom is very concerned about him being normal, and I mentioned it to her more often than I did James’ mom because she needed some reassuring herself that he was fitting in.”

The majority of parents and teachers who reported communicating with each other regarding specific friendships said they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with this communication. A few parents (only of children with DD) gave a mixed response. For example, one parent said she wanted additional teacher help in making a connection with another family in order to arrange play dates for her child.

Discussion

We investigated the beliefs of parents and teachers regarding the nature and importance of existing friendships between children with and without DD in inclusive settings and the strategies adults employed to support these specific friendships. We used interviews to examine both parent and teacher support of specific, dyadic friendships. Finally, we documented parent-teacher communication regarding the children’s friendships.

Nature and importance of friendships. Parents and teachers reported similar beliefs about the nature of these friendships, and their reported beliefs are aligned with conceptualizations of early friendship in the literature. Specifically, our findings portrayed preschoolers’ DD-WO/DD friendships as dyadic, voluntary, and harmonious relationships, characterized by mutual positive affect and enjoyment (see Asher et al., 1996; Buysse et al., 2008; Dietrich, 2005; Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995; Rubin et al., 1998). Our results are also consistent with existing research indicating that most parents place a high value on friendships for their preschool children, particularly for their emotional benefits but also as a context for development of social skills (Rhodes, 2002). In addition, teachers reported that they believe friendships are important for their preschool students (Kemple, Hysmith, & David, 1996; Kowalski et al., 2001), especially specific friendships for children with DD. This was evident in teacher responses to separate questions about importance for individual children and by teachers’ direct comparisons of importance (e.g., “I don’t think it’s [as] important to Monique as it is [to] David because Monique has other friends that she can turn to”).

Practices used to support friendships. Parents and teachers reported using strategies along a continuum from general, passive strategies (e.g., letting children choose their friends) to more active and intentional strategies focused on friendship dyads composed of children with DD and WO/DD. The more active strategies included arranging for the friends to be together and explicitly facilitating their interactions. Buysse et al. (2003) found that teachers were most active in friendship practices when at least one child in the dyad had DD. Although the use of some passive strategies may be appropriate (e.g., observing children to determine which dyads show an attraction for each other), more active
strategies (e.g., inviting two children to play together) may be needed to facilitate more enduring friendships for children with DD once children’s interest in particular peers has been determined.

Parents described a number of strategies that are consistent with the literature (e.g., arranging for children to play together, supervising and monitoring their play, and promoting their interactions during play [see Bhavnagri & Parke, 1991; Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, 1992; Parke et al., 2002]). Purposeful arrangements for children to play together outside of schools may be especially important for young children. Though not strictly focused on friendships, Ladd and Golter (1988) found that parents who arranged peer contacts for their children had children with a larger peer social network and more consistent playmates outside of schools. Children need to interact and develop relationships with peers in a variety of contexts to develop peer-related social competence. Moreover, parents may play an important role in facilitating social opportunities for their children (McCollum & Ostrosky, 2008). Overall, the variety of friendship practices parents reported using was an encouraging finding. Assertions that friendships were important, notwithstanding, not all parents were actively involved in supporting these friendships and most of the DD-WO/DD dyads did not participate in regular play dates outside of their preschool settings. Some parents noted their own busy schedules as reasons for lack of play dates. Furthermore, many parents reported the belief that teachers used practices to facilitate friendships while their children were at school. Thus, parents may have felt less of a need to actively support friendship dyads outside of preschools.

Several strategies mentioned by teachers are also consistent with the literature (e.g., assigning children specific play partners and demonstrating social skills [see Brown et al., 2001; Sparkman, 2003], providing time for free play and encouraging friendships through positive comments about children’s play [see Buysse et al., 2003]). As with parents, the variety of different practices teachers reported using to support friendships was encouraging. In particular, many teachers reported using facilitative practices. However, teachers seldom planned friends’ favorite activities as a context for facilitating friendship relations. This has implications for day-to-day practices in that teachers should be encouraged to more frequently and intentionally draw children together by providing activities that will capture their attention and provide common contexts for social interactions. For example, Buysse et al. (2008) suggested that planning high interest activities may encourage a friend to join in the play of a child with mobility difficulties. Consistent with existing research, teachers reported never or rarely helping parents arrange play dates for the friends outside of the early education setting (e.g., Buysse et al., 2003). Teachers may believe this to be outside of their realm of professional responsibility or may hesitate to recommend play dates between some children for fear of excluding children. One teacher said that she tried not to talk with parents about a specific dyad: “Because when the parents come in, we’re in front of the other kids and I know the kids have a tendency to say . . . if Miss Edna talked . . . about Jakim and Dennis being friends, is she going to talk to my mom about me being friends . . . ?” Indeed, only one teacher noted that she actively encouraged a friendship to develop by putting specific children together in the first place, and even she seemed unsure about her response: “I think I might have started it and asked, and maybe suggested it, and luckily they kept with it.” Although friendships are by definition chosen by the friends themselves, we believe it is very appropriate for teachers to pay attention to
children’s interests and “socially nudge” children with similar interests to play together, thereby encouraging potential friendships to emerge (cf., Buysse et al., 2008).

Although teachers reported using a range of practices, many of the teachers made comments suggesting a lack of forethought or intentionality with regard to use of one or more practices to support friendships (e.g., “It wasn’t anything I did consciously”). Kemple et al. (1996) suggested that teachers believe they have limited influence on children’s social-emotional development, especially with regard to development of friendships. Unfortunately, teachers who believe they have restricted influence may be much less likely to engage in practices aimed at promoting children’s emerging friendships. Both preservice and inservice personnel preparation and professional development programs should prepare teachers with strategies and make practitioners skilled in methods to facilitate dyadic interactions and social relationships with a conscious programmatic goal for teachers who work in inclusive programs to promote emergent friendships. Buysse et al. (2008) recommended a number of promising practices for supporting friendships, ranging from classroom-wide practices for setting up an environment conducive for friendship development to individualized interventions for selected children (e.g., interpreting or speaking for children with communication disabilities). Other researchers have recommended similar intervention hierarchies to facilitate peer interactions and the broader construct of children’s social-emotional competence (e.g., Brown et al., 2001; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Han & Kemple, 2006).

**Parent-teacher communication about friendships.** Our findings indicated that most parents and teachers did communicate about specific friendships. In general, participants communicated through informal conversations and were quite satisfied with parent-teacher communication about friendships, noting few barriers to such communication. Noteworthy, however, was the absence of responses indicating that teachers viewed parents as valuable sources of information or important contributors to children’s friendships. On the one hand, teachers reported giving information and being asked about or provided with information about friendships. On the other hand, they did not report asking parents for information relating to specific friendships. Likewise, parents did not report themselves as valuable sources of information about children’s friendships, with the one exception of a parent who would have appreciated additional friendship-focused communication with teachers: “I would really like to be considered more of a valuable resource and active member of Luke’s team.” A clear implication for practice may be that teachers should strive to build partnerships with families to support children’s friendships and that personnel preparation and professional development programs should provide training and strategies focused on implementing family-centered practices as recommended by professional guidelines and standards (e.g., Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Finally, the privacy policies of a few preschools appeared to hinder communication about children’s friendships. Whereas confidentiality about children’s disability status, information on IEPs, and other family information is required, teachers and parents should be able to find ways to communicate about young children’s friendships without compromising protected information. Many teachers in this study said they did so through informal conversations with parents (e.g., at drop off and pick up times). One simple and straightforward practice at the beginning of the school year might be for teachers to request parents’ written permission to share the names of children’s friends in relevant communication across the school year.
Study Limitations

“Qualitative research is not done for purposes of generalization, but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 203). This research met quality indicators of interview studies described by Brantlinger et al. (2005) in that reasonable interview questions were asked, digital recordings facilitated accurate transcription of interviews, and participant confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and removal of any identifying information. However, limitations should be noted relating to participant characteristics and whether “readers will see similarities to their situations” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 203) and judge the information provided to be relevant. The overwhelming majority of children with DD in these friendship dyads were male. Parents and teachers may report different beliefs and practices for friendships involving females. Additional details about the children’s DD (e.g., through a review of IEPs) might have provided readers with more information with which to judge the relevance of these findings. Findings should also be interpreted with the understanding that parent involvement in the children’s friendships was variable. Only a few participants knew their children’s friends and their families well and arranged regular play dates outside of preschool settings. A few others were familiar with their children’s friends through schools but did not report active involvement in supporting the friendship. Had regular play dates been a criterion for inclusion in this study, it is possible that findings may have included additional promising practices. Given our convenience sample and the design of the study, all participants had enrolled their children in inclusive preschools or were employed in those programs. Our sampling strategy may be an indicator of participants’ increased awareness of the possibilities for social interactions between children with and without DD in inclusive settings. Moreover, parents’ and teachers’ awareness may mean that their beliefs and practices are not typical of other parents and teachers. A final limitation is that our approach relied on parent and teacher report, rather than directly observed behavior, and participants may have provided responses they felt were socially acceptable. However, parents reported that teachers used practices that teachers themselves reported using, and teachers reported that parents used practices that parents themselves reported using, thus providing some measure of triangulation for the adult descriptions and reports. Future researchers who are interested in friendships might consider direct classroom observations to further document practices teachers use in support of preschool friendships between children with and without DD. Additional recommendations for future research are presented next.

Future Research Directions

Research is needed on the benefits of friendships for young children (e.g., on the protective effects of friendship, as less is known currently about this than about the detrimental effects of peer rejection on children’s development [Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004]). Future investigators might focus attention on early stages of friendship development between two children to better understand the development of friendships and their influence later in life (Berndt, 2004). Intervention research is needed to investigate more thoroughly the effects of well-specified friendship strategies on young children’s emergent
friendships. For example, particular practices may be especially beneficial for young children who have not yet established reciprocal friendships. Furthermore, additional research is needed to investigate how the nature and severity of disability affect parents’ and teachers’ beliefs and practices in support of young children’s friendships. For example, researchers may want to focus on parents’ and teachers’ beliefs and practices to promote friendships of children with significant social delays such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. Finally, additional research is needed to determine the best methods for technical assistance and professional development for teachers who want to promote social interactions and more enduring friendships. Indeed, professional development practices should be based on family-centered practices that support children’s emerging friendships inside and outside of schools. Careful attention to promising day-to-day practices that promote children’s friendships, especially preschoolers with DD and WO/DD, may be an important avenue for better understanding and intervening with children’s social emotional competence.

References


