Acceptance and belonging - the importance of peers as role models

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David has not always found it easy to socially connect with others. Difficulty understanding social cues and the skills needed for social relating do not come naturally to him. Sometimes David needed prompts as to how to respond when others tried to engage with him. David's mum, Robyn, might say, "Hey David that kid just said hello and waved, when you say hello, it's good to look at people at the same time and return their gaze. That way people understand that you have received their greeting and you are returning it also".

One of David's great strengths is that he tries his hardest at everything he pursues, including his extra-curricular activities. His Mum has always acknowledged and appreciated this, continuing to encourage David to get involved in his extra-curricular activities, especially sporting ones, despite his history of issues around low muscular tone that made many gross and fine motor skills challenging. One of these pursuits is swimming, which is a skill David is determined to master.

When David entered high school he opted to join the school swim team that regularly trained outside of school hours. David is in a school environment where trying your hardest is highly valued. David's tenacity at his swimming has won much admiration from his peers, not only from the peers within his own school year but also from the entire team. Through this commitment David is constantly improving his swimming style and achieving new personal best times, success that seemed inconceivable many years ago due to David's early challenges in physical ability. This is a tremendous feat in itself but Robyn realised David was making other breakthroughs that, though not as obvious to everyone, were in-fact more vital to his future success and happiness in life.

David was learning all the intricacies and subtleties of what it means to become part of and remain within a group and his peers were the natural teachers. More effective than numerous reminders or teaching moments, was the opportunity David embraced to forge the social connections so important to belonging to a group. David learnt to adapt his own behaviour by modelling the behaviour of his valued peer models.

David's confidence grew as he felt valued by the team, primarily for his unrelenting perseverance, which has yielded continued improvement. Team culture celebrates personal bests and hard work; David has demonstrated both, time and again. Belonging to a group and being accepted is a natural human desire and through constant exposure to his peers, David has learnt many of the social skills needed to participate and belong to such group.

Being part of the group was so important that David insisted that he experience and be part of every aspect of the group's activities, including travelling to and from school to the pool where the boys train. When mum wanted to pick David up from the pool, which was closer to home than school, David wasn't keen and requested that he be allowed to travel back to school on the bus with the other kids in the team. Whilst David's mum was keen to get him home earlier than his usual time, she began to understand the importance of the bus trip as part of belonging to the group and how David could perceive himself as different, if he digressed from the groups" regular trip back to

school. She realised that David didn't want to be treated any differently from the rest of the group, as this would threaten his membership of that group, which was becoming well established.

On the bus all that happened at training gets discussed and relived, jokes are shared and plans and goals are made. But much more than this happens on this incidental trip for David. This is another opportunity to further explore the social connections within the group, share interests and experiences, beyond swimming. It is within the domain of these social interactions that David is more likely to form and cement friendships based on common interests. Robyn commented that issues related to David's disability seem much more insignificant now, compared to when he commenced high school.

David is no longer "different" or "special". He is just part of the team. Robyn believes there were some key things that took place to give David the best chance of learning how to connect with others. The first key was to involve David in pursuits that were based on his real interests which he enjoyed and was likely to continue in. Secondly, it was important to pursue something that highlighted David's strengths, strengths that would be valued by others. David may not be the best swimmer on the team but he is valued for being one of the hardest working. Thirdly, Robyn made sure his interests brought David regularly and frequently into contact with kids his own age who he was likely to build connections with around their shared interests. Lastly, Robyn encouraged David to be part of every experience and aspect of his role within the team, including the incidental bus trips, which confirmed his place within the group.

Robyn knows that if anybody was going to encourage her son to learn all that it takes to make friends then it was contact with other kids without communication challenges that would be the ideal role models. These learning opportunities have given David confidence to want to widen his social connections and interests outside of school, interests that could be developed during the school holidays. David has learnt what it means to be part of a group; he has learnt the subtle art of social relating and is improving his social skills all the time. These skills can only be learnt by valued role models in valued settings, such as David's swim team. They are not learnt in isolation or without appropriate role models. David's future is looking promising in light of his inclusive school environment.