

Jack's Bunch of Mates

Over the years we have spoken to many families with teenaged children whom often express how hard the high school years are. Like any parent we wanted Jack to thrive in his teenage years and have a real sense of belonging.

We observed that play was changing in year 5/6 and Jack was often floating alone through the schoolyard. Jack was well known at school, but friendships were not deepening. When Jack was asked to join a game of handball or 'build ups', he would usually say 'no'. We could see where this was heading.... isolation and loneliness. We needed to understand why Jack wouldn't join in, as we knew he liked these games. We knew we needed his peers to help us figure this out. We decided to be very intentional and ask a little from his peers.

This was the beginning of the idea of a Bunch of Mates forming, an intentional group of students coming together for the purpose of nurturing healthy, positive and deep friendships. We knew we couldn't make people be friends, but we could create opportunities for friendships to flourish simply by kids coming together, sharing experiences based on interests in and outside of school. Isn't this how friendships flourish for anyone, through shared interests....doing something together?

We talked to Jack about the idea and then went to the school to discuss how it could work within the school context. We had researched other initiatives from interstate/overseas to understand how other people have run similar groups. Many had a paid facilitator who would come into the school. Given our idea was in a fledgling stage, we were not willing to hand over the facilitator's role to somebody and decided to facilitate Jack's Bunch of Mates ourselves. The school agreed we could run the Bunch of Mates once a week during the lunch hour, hence the importance of having a good, trusting relationship with the school.

An invitation (not permission slip) was sent home with 8 students whom Jack had identified with a description around what a Bunch of Mates was and how students could be involved in being a part of Jack's Bunch of Mates. The Bunch of Mates then started the following week with over 15 students coming along. At first session we had pizza for lunch and focused on "getting to know each other"(we always have come together with food). It was an opportunity to talk about each child's interests and how they spent their time after school and on weekends.

Since this first meeting in May 2014, Jack's Bunch of Mates continues to meet every week. We always enjoy lunch together and do different activities like handball, touch footy and soccer in the playground. We discuss and plan getting together outside of school, we talk about how

Jack and his mates can do things together during lunch times. We focus on the similarities and shared interests. We always go back to the purpose of the Bunch of Mates of creating opportunities for friendships to deepen.

As a result of the intentionality of the Bunch of Mates, little incidental acts of true friendships and what friends do together have happenedwe call these the 'golden moments' – such as one boy dropping in one morning asking Jack to walk to school with him, Jack couldn't get out the door fast enough or kicking the footy after school. It may seem like something quite typical, but it was huge for our family.

Since we took the plunge facilitating Jack's Bunch of Mates we have found the positives far outweighed the time and investment. Not only has this deepened our relationships with the Bunch of Mates and their parents, we have been able to share our vision for Jack with them. The Bunch of Mates have given us an easy avenue to initiate opportunities for Jack to be involved socially with his mates which has been reciprocated through birthday parties, sleepovers and just hanging out. Some kids have moved to another school but are still keenly involved in the Bunch of Mates outside of school.

In the last few months we have been nurturing the involvement of year 10 students in the school to occasionally facilitate the Bunch of Mates. We have also employed a young and cool co-facilitator with Jack's NDIS funding that can connect Jack to his peers with things like hanging out after school or on weekends, an uncool role for a parent.

These relationships are so important for Jack not just now but into the future. Jack may find it hard to join a big game of handball, but will always get involved with his Bunch of Mates. Jack feels safe and connected. We can see the genuine friendships that have grown. Who knows, some of the Bunch of Mates may even become his first flatmates when Jack finishes school and moves into a home of his own.

What the Bunch of Mates have done

- Handball, touch footy and soccer games at school.
- Learning how to get Jack involved.
- Walking to school together.
- Going to the pool.
- Catching the bus to swimming lessons together (without mum).
- Movie nights.
- Fishing trip.
- Learning Minecraft together.
- Star wars movie nights.

Core principles

- Kids in mainstream school in regular classrooms – not kids grouped because of disability.
- Focus on relationships.
- Taking it beyond the school gate.
- Driven by family.
- Invitations not permission slips.

Tips for starting a Bunch of Mates

- Be intentional.
- Be driven by your vision.
- Be clear on the purpose of the Bunch of Mates and always revisit this with the kids.
- Talk to the school and tell them it has been done elsewhere and it is working.
- It is understandable to be nervous but remember that they are kids and this gives them a sense of belonging too. Have courage.
- The focus is your family member – they are at the centre of their Bunch of Mates.
- Just do it – otherwise you end up thinking about it for too long.
- It is really nerve wracking, but just remember they are just kids. Have fun.