



Friendship Groups for Everybody: Bringing Club G to Your School

We all understand that bullying is not cool. But what is the opposite? How do kids learn empathy and caring? A group of students at Highlands Elementary have absorbed compassion and kindness into their characters with help from each other and one special classmate. In 2011, while in Grade 4, they joined a recess and noon-time friendship group and called it "Club G" after their classmate Ges ("Jess"). Even though it was intended to help their friend be included on and off the school playground, the club contributed to the social and emotional development of everyone involved.

Club G: the video

Their story is told in a heartwarming video that shares what the kids learned about themselves and how their acts of empathy and caring within the Club changed everyone involved—

adults and kids. If you ask the members of Club G, they would tell you there should be more Club G's in the world, that the world would be a better place if other kids had opportunities like they've had. And they're not just talking about the "focus child" and whatever disability that child is living with. They're talking about themselves. Watch it at seedsociety.ca/clubg.html.

Create a friendship group at your school!

Parent Carmen Farrell and educator Wendy Holtan (seedsociety.ca/staff.html) are passionate about friendship groups like Club G and what they can offer school communities. While they stress there is no one approach, and new friendship groups are unlikely to look much like Club G, the daily acts of compassion that would

be common to these groups can be character forming for young children.

Getting started

Invite Carmen to speak to your PAC. Her story of advocating for Ges will touch your heart and perhaps inspire some ideas for your school. Carmen would be happy to speak with anyone at your school interested in starting a friendship group. And Wendy Holtan can draw on her experience in helping to support thriving children's friendship groups to help your school design and start its own Club!

You can reach Carmen and Wendy at: info@seedsociety.ca



SOME STEPS TO THINK ABOUT FOR STARTING YOUR OWN, UNIQUE FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Even though the continued success of any "Club G" type of organization relies on the time and skills of the staff in the school district and school, a parent plays a critical role and without that involvement, it's much harder for a social group to be successful. The parent is as important as any other member of the Club.

I think there were a few things that we "got right" as a family with "Club G".

COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER PARENTS ABOUT YOUR CHILD

Before the club ever started, we made sure we communicated proactively about our son with the other families in his classes. At the beginning of each school year, starting in kindergarten, [we sent a letter home](#) (an example is at the end of this document) explaining a bit about Ges, inviting other's curiosity and questions, and making sure to highlight Ges' strengths as well as his challenges. This had a few impacts:

- A. It encouraged parents to talk with their child about ours.
- B. It stopped any "story-making" that is our natural human tendency. Think about that for a minute...if someone behaves in a way that isn't how we would predict or is curious to us in some way - whether we're adult or child- in the absence of "the truth", we will make up a story in our heads so that we can make sense of the curious behaviour.
- C. I have heard so many times about a child "on the spectrum" that s/he "doesn't want to make friends". I find that difficult to accept in reality, and you'll see in our sample letter at the end of this document how we dealt with that for our son. As the years have gone on, the letter changed and now has less explanation about Ges and more about how he's developed. I think the latter is important because it can appear like he's not developing in some ways...but of course he is.

TEACH THE KIDS WHAT'S IT'S LIKE TO BE YOUR CHILD

We invited either district staff or someone from the list in the "resources" link on our website to come and "demystify" autism, or other things about our son for the kids in his classes. Because Ges has some physical challenges (that keep improving over time!), as young kids (October of Kindergarten) they got to experience feelings of empathy right away by having to try to colour with crayons while wearing oven mitts, trying to balance on one leg on a wobble board, or trying to tell a classmate a story without speaking. This was also repeated more than once in the early grades...and they still get a little "refresher" at the beginning of Club G each fall. The first year we funded it ourselves with community-based resources because we were fortunate to be in a position where that was financially possible for us, and it communicated to the school system how MUCH of a priority this was for us.

So before we even started with the "nuts and bolts" of a social group for Ges, we had helped create a community that:

- a. was interested in Ges through their understanding;
- b. was informed about Ges through some activities and information, and;
- c. who knew they could ask us ANY questions any time about him.

I think, in part, because of these things, we didn't "need" to organize anything for Ges until sometime after Grade 2.

WHAT AGE IS THE RIGHT AGE TO START A CLUB G?

This would be something else I would watch as a parent. People often ask, "at what age is a Club G appropriate?" The short answer is "any age". BUT, the most important thing to know is that a Club for your child or student is going to look quite different from Club G. I think it's impossible to take one approach and simply copy it in other places. Club G is based on what Ges enjoys and needs and what his classmates enjoy doing with him. What another child enjoys and needs will of course, be very different.

At a young age my guess would be that most children will simply respond well to information and "training" similar to what we did. They may need a little more support

to organize their games of tag or hide n' seek, but until friendships start changing and maturing a bit around age 8, a "natural" friendship group may spring up around your child. Young kids will need more support from an aide, a teacher or district staff to keep the momentum going...so advocating for a skilled aide for your child is also important. Beyond the skills and experience, you'll need someone the other kids like, someone with energy and decent communication skills, and someone who seems interested in your child.

WHAT IF THERE ISN'T A "NATURAL" PLAYGROUP AT A YOUNG AGE?

That's ok! It just means starting with some of the steps outlined below at this age, rather than at Grade 2, 3 or 4. And it means the kids will be less "in charge" of it than they would be at a later age...they will need more direction and support from the adults around them. As time goes on they can become more "in charge".

WHAT IS THE PARENT'S ROLE?

Watch for which kids take an interest in your child and make sure you organize play dates at your home and in the community, and cultivate a relationship between yourself and their parents if you can. It can be hard at times, but above all, stay open about your child and try not to judge what sometimes comes out of people's mouths. They're learning too, and that's part of your job as well...to help others grow through their interactions with you and your child. Try to see the good intention behind what is said, not focus on any impact it may be having on you.

The most important job the family has, or at least one parent has, is to be a kind of cheerleader. You must stay involved, you must ask questions, express appreciation, and offer help along the way! Ask if you can "drop in" sometimes on the playground to see what the kids are doing. You know how hard it can be to parent; you have bad days and days when you think things aren't improving. Just because someone is paid to be with your child doesn't mean they don't feel those things too. Let them know what's happening at home, what other kids say on play dates about what they do at school, and anything "cute" or appreciative your child has said or done that links back to the work of your Club or social group.

And sometimes...just showing up and showing interest is enough. The jobs of teachers and aides can be a bit lonely because other adults aren't around to see the good things they see. It's nice for them to have someone like you to share that with. And always keep in your heart the fact that someone (your child's aide, teacher, principal) at school is looking out for your child and trying to do their best.

STEPS FOR SCHOOL STAFF TO CONSIDER IN STARTING A FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Assuming your school district has specialized support staff that work with special needs children, and that your school has a teacher or aide willing to support a friendship group for your child, here are some things that they might need to do before your Club is up and running...and as they get started. But again, remember...each Club will be a bit different.

- ❖ Meet with parents of the "focus child" to explain the program and learn the child's interests, strengths, motivators and challenges from the family.
- ❖ Meet with principal and relevant staff to explain the program.
- ❖ Present to student's classmates – could be video/simulation/talk – also involves talking with the classmates about the look of the group, i.e. what kids are going to be doing (the focus child will not be present for this).
- ❖ Permission slips back from families.
- ❖ Conduct a series of small group meetings to teach classmates how to communicate effectively with the student. Depending on the age level this could be a few lunch times with each small group or up to five sessions (here the kids would get handouts about the communication steps).
- ❖ Work out a schedule.
- ❖ District support staff should attend the first few club meetings to model for the school staff and get the group moving.
- ❖ District support staff should regularly check-in with school staff to ensure the program is continuing and to keep the supporting kids excited and involved.

- ❖ Take photos, give the kids feedback, cookies for celebrations.
- ❖ For some groups it could mean getting some play equipment, for some it would be knitting needles or Lego...depending on the interests of the children.

For Club G, over the years we have played adapted playground games, bocce ball, sharing of jokes and publishing a Club G book of them, Lego and board games, done baking in the school kitchen, yoga, and adapted gym games (for example, we slowed down volleyball by using a few balloons at once instead of one fast-moving and scary volleyball!)

Hello, we are Carmen Farrell and Gervase (Jervis) Bushe and our son, Ges (Jess) is in your child's kindergarten class. We thought it would be helpful to tell you a little about Ges because at some point we're sure your child will have questions you might otherwise not be able to answer.



Around 15 months we noticed Ges's motor development was not what it should be. After a couple of years of medical tests coming back normal, however, we have no explanation. We don't know why, and we don't know exactly what is going on, but the best way to explain it is that Ges is unable to make his muscles do what he wants them to do. It takes him a long time to learn any motor skill – fine or gross – and he doesn't learn it the way most of us do. For him it takes thousands of times of repetition to get any control over any muscular movement.

Motor development is strongly linked to psycho-emotional development and so Ges' social development has been delayed along with his motor skills. He has developed in the same sequence as other kids, and continues to develop everyday, but at a much slower pace than most children. For example, it is only in the past year that he has become interested in playing with children outside our family and wanting to be included in groups. This is still at an early state but we see the same kind of changes taking place in him today that we saw in our daughter, Shannon who is now in grade 2, when she was 3.

On the other hand, Ges's cognitive development has appeared normal. His language comprehension has always been normal. Last year he was in a Montessori pre-school, where children choose what they want to learn, and his teachers report that his choices and activities are all very age appropriate. Ges loves books and computers and started reading at age 3. He can read phonetically and has a reading vocabulary of many hundred words.

At this time, because of his motor challenges, Ges can't talk coherently and this affects the way he interacts with others. He will vocalize sounds, especially when he's excited or engaged, and we've come to believe that in his head he is trying to talk. It can sound very odd and inappropriate but we are starting to be able to understand words. We believe he is quite sensitive to how others see him and is very aware of his differences. He will sometimes appear to not be listening or paying attention but he hears and understands everything. We think he has developed a certain "aloof" demeanor, at times, as a way of managing his shame about his differences.

He has a very sweet, gentle nature but his main way of expressing affection is hugging and his main way of interacting with other children is physically. We have never seen him intentionally hurt others but at times this physicality is inappropriate and can scare other children. If he is told how to be and what is OK he will quickly comply with that. If he tries to hug your child it is his way of expressing liking but his hugs can be fierce, and your child can tell him not to do that, to do it differently, or whatever they feel comfortable with and he will understand and adjust to it.

We see Ges growing and developing every day, but in his own way and in his own time. We feel certain that at some point in the future he will grow into himself and appear like everyone else – but he won't be. He'll be a very special person who has had to work so hard everyday to do what most of us do without thinking, and how could that not significantly impact the kind of person he becomes? We hope you and your child come to see the brave and kind little soul that Ges is, his expansive sense of humour, natural generosity and caring. If you have any questions or would like to have a play date call Carmen at ###-###-####