



Hawai`i Deaf-Blind Project presents:

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The Treasure of Friends – Mom, I want friends! Stella Chang

One day my nine-year-old daughter looked at me and signed, “Mom, I want friends.” When I saw the yearning in her eyes, my heart ached. That was a wake-up call. I thought going to the Deaf school would be enough for her. She has classmates that she sees and does things with every day. However, during school breaks, all of those were missing. It seemed like she was cut off from a world of friends. She told me she wants friends that she can hang out with outside of school. I realized that she had a great need that had not been met. So I started thinking, “who can be her friend?”

I talked to the school counselor about this, and she was so nice to connect me with another parent whose daughter was in the same class with my daughter. We planned a trip to the Discovery Center, and the two girls had a lot of fun. Then I thought I could have a birthday party and invite my daughter’s classmates over to my house. Planning things like this was not easy because my daughter needed tube feeding every hour and half, and she got sick easily. What if she got sick on the day of party? What activity should I plan that is suitable for her and her friends, provided that she is not good at any physical activity, e.g., running, jumping, biking, or any kind of sports? I had not done this earlier was that I just had so many concerns. However, I knew I needed to try. So I sent out the invitation cards and two classmates were able to come. We had games in the house, a cake, and piñata. The children had a good time.

Over the years, I invited the other parent’s daughter to go out with my daughter to the bookstore, movie, and beach. They seemed to get along quite well. However, I would not describe their relationship as good friends. Something was still lacking!

I realized that my daughter does not know how to be a friend. She lacks the social skills to initiate conversation, talk story, and express sympathy. She has been more interested in adults than in her peers because the grownups are more accepting and patient.

Her peers may think she is different because she has other physical challenges. We discussed this issue during an IEP meeting, and the counselor suggested that my daughter participate in a girls talk group that she (the counselor) moderated. As time went by, I have seen some progress with friendships. My daughter would tell me what she and her classmates chatted about during lunch or recess.

My daughter still has a lot to learn about how to make friends and how to be a friend. I wish I had started early to help her in this area. I think parents need to play an active role in helping our special-needs children have opportunity to build friendships. My daughter has an older girl from church who cares about her. Even though the girl does not sign, she plays with my daughter and tries to communicate with her. Now the older girl has left for college. She is a great role model for my daughter. I hope my daughter can learn that if she cannot find a friend, she can still be a friend to somebody.

For more information about the Hawai`i & Pacific Deaf Blind Project, please contact Stella Chang, yhchang@hawaii.edu or check out our website at <http://www.pdb.hawaii.edu/>



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