

Friendships and Community Connections for Children with Disabilities

We all dream that our children will be social, happy members in their schools and communities. But instead, we find that this is one of the most challenging parts of parenting a child with special needs.

Family Voices reached out to Stefanie Primm, Director and a Community Inclusion Facilitator, of Living Our Visions ([LOV Inc.](#)) for suggestions to get children with special health care needs connected to their communities.

LOV Inc.'s **Bridge Builder** program pairs a young adult (YA) with a staff member to identify personal interests, set goals and make lasting, natural connections to the community. Recently, this program has grown to include younger children enrolled in the Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) program.

WHERE TO BEGIN

There are steps families can take to start building connections that can lead to friendships.

It Starts with Family

If you want your child or YA to make friends and connect with others, you need to start letting go and realize that you won't always be there. This is one of the hardest things parents do. We need to learn to **move out of our comfort zone**, take a risk and allow someone else to go with our children to parties, activities or community events.

Next Step

Look at your child or YA's current activities. What holds your child's interest? What makes your child happy? Excited? By paying attention to the pastimes, and environments that keep your child involved, you will know which community activities to look into first.

Stefanie suggests, "Try activities with older people or younger kids, and **not** your child's same-age peers. Your child might feel more comfortable. For example, look for a volunteer spot at a senior center or at an event for preschool-age kids."

Connect Interests to Your Community

- Are there classes, clubs, social groups or other school-based activities or events that your child can join?
- Are there after-school programs, booster clubs or sports leagues in your area?
- Is there a local agency, like a library or food bank, or where your child can volunteer or be part of a community event?
- Are you part of a faith community that has events, gatherings or study groups?
- Visit a spot where people know your child like a coffee shop, grocery store or YMCA. This is a great way to feel connected and part of the community.

THINK ABOUT BARRIERS

There will be challenges with any new activity. The best way to deal with them is to plan ahead. Think about issues like transportation, long-term commitments or fees to participate. Then, think about how these barriers can be removed.

Modifications

You want your child to take part in an activity—not be a spectator. To do this you'll need to ask for **modifications**, or changes to the way your child can participate in the activity to his/her fullest ability. Following are a few ideas to bust through the most common barriers.

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Did You Know? Now You Know!

What is Social Capital and Why Does it Matter for My Child?

If you have a crisis, who would you call? Your contacts—The people you rely on when you have a problem—is your social capital. To have social capital, you need to network and build relationships that are based on trust and cooperation. For children or young adults with disabilities, social capital begins by getting to know the people in your community, and allowing those people to get to know your child.

“Individuals with high levels of social capital are expected to work toward the common good of everyone in their community or network. Social capital is strongly connected to **self-determination** in that it gives the individual the power to make decisions, have choices and adds control and direction to one’s life.”

-National Gateway to Self-Determination, *Accessing Social Capital Implications for People with Disabilities*, 2010.

Social capital is at the center of our children building friendships and connections at school and in the community.

How to Start Building Social Capital:¹

- Step out of your comfort zone. Find ways to make social connections, even if it’s not easy for you.
- Take your child with you on your errands. Think of these trips as activities or outings.
- Let your local community get to know your child by frequenting local shops.
- Strike up conversations with people like cashiers, bank attendants and the people who bag your groceries and include your child.
- Look for volunteer opportunities that match your child’s interests.

¹ Lisa Lightner, [How and Why to Build Social Capital for your Disabled Child](#), “A Day in Our Shoes,” February 6, 2020.

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Technology We think about technology when it comes to schoolwork, but there are other ways to use iPads, assistive technology or low-tech modifications that let your child or YA be involved in an activity. For example, one family used audiobooks and an iPad to help their YA to be part of a book club. Another family worked with the school’s athletic department for their son to be a member of a team by using modified equipment.

Try Before You Buy If there is a registration fee, ask the organizers if your child can try the activity to see if it’s a good fit before you pay. Most clubs or sports league organizers are understanding about this.

1-on-1 Support to Participate You’re used to being the one to support your child at events. But instead, could you hire a respite provider or peer to attend the activity? Or, could you ask your school about finding a peer mentor or other friends from class? Read our [Friendships and Community Connections](#) fact sheet for more suggestions.

Be Willing to Try, Try Again and Fail Stefanie expressed it this way, “Realize this will take time and patience, and sometimes it won’t work out.” She added, “Start small. Attend a club gathering or recreational activity in the background a few times to see if it might work.”

Think Long-Term If you want your child to be part of the community start by finding a few opportunities to make connections. It may not be easy, but if you start small you’ll find it has its own rewards.

Policy Update

New and Improved Services for CLTS Program Participants

Starting **January 1**, children enrolled in Wisconsin's Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) program have access to new service benefits. Wisconsin's Department of Health Services also updated existing benefits to better fit the needs of families. These changes come after listening to input from families, providers and other stakeholders. These updates have been approved at the federal level as part of the state's waiver renewal.

The new benefits include:

- Health and wellness services
- Discovery and career planning services
- Safety planning and prevention
- Virtual equipment and supports

Changes were also made to family/unpaid caregiver supports, community inclusion services, daily-living skills training, personal supports and transportation. We encourage you to talk with your child's Support and Service Coordinator about the new benefits and if they meet the goals in your child's Individual Service Plan. More information is available at dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02874.pdf.

Now is the time to make sure we've done all we can to keep everyone protected against COVID! This means getting family members, ages 5 and older, fully vaccinated, wearing a well-fitting mask and getting tested if you aren't feeling well.

Vaccines are widely available. To find locations and make an appointment call **211** or go to dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/vaccine.htm. [#fvaccineoutreach](https://twitter.com/fvaccineoutreach)

Tools to Fight Omicron:



+

VACCINATE

+

BOOST

+

TEST



Northeast Region
Children's Hospital
of Wisconsin
Fox Valley
877.568.5205

Northern Region
Marathon County
Health Dept.
Wausau
866.640.4106

Southeast Region
Children's Hospital
Milwaukee
800.234.5437

Southern Region
Waisman Center
Madison
800.532.3321

Western Region
Chippewa County
Dept of Public Health
Chippewa Falls
800.400.3678

Want to Learn More?



For more information on our articles visit these websites:

Family Voices of Wisconsin
familyvoiceswi.org

National Family Voices
familyvoices.org

LOV, Inc.
lovinc.org

WI CLTS Program
dhs.wisconsin.gov/clts

Ahh, winter...

✓ Have you watched everything on Netflix?

✓ Have you knitted until everyone you know has a scarf?

✓ Have you baked enough bread?

Then, it's time to try something new.



**FAMILY VOICES
ON-DEMAND TRAININGS!**

MAKE 2022 YOUR YEAR TO TRY SOMETHING NEW.

[FAMILYVOICESWI.ORG/LEARN](https://familyvoiceswi.org/learn)



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Registration
Opens Soon!

SAVE
THE
DATE

Advocacy for Change

A Virtual Conference

March 23 & 24
9:00 - 12:00

Advocacy for Change 2022 is Family Voices of Wisconsin's annual policy conference for parents and caregivers of children, ages 21 and under, who have special health care needs and disabilities.

This year's event is **two** morning sessions. Like our past conferences, we'll provide:

1:1 coaching on your message to legislators.

Advocacy strategies and skill-building sessions to make sure your voice is heard.

The latest information about legislative priorities.

All activities, including visits with state legislators, will be virtual using Zoom.

Registration Coming Soon!

Learn more at
familyvoiceswi.org/advocacy-for-change



About Family Voices

If you have a child with a disability or special health care need, you've come to the right place! We're here to help you **navigate** the services available to your family. It's a complicated system and our goal is to provide you and your family with some tools. **Connect** with other families, learn how to **advocate** for your child, and discover how you can be a voice for all children with special needs.

Every parent wants to see their kids have friends and be part of the community. But finding ways for our children or young adults (YA) with disabilities to be included in school and community activities usually means we have to be there.

This fact sheet offers options that **do not** rely on parents or other family members to give direct support. We have suggestions on how to find these trusted people, even when it's hard to hire caregivers or other community support staff. These ideas will help your child start to engage in the community and build friendships.

Tip for Families



Take the risk of trusting someone else to support your child or YA with special health care needs. By allowing your support in everyday activities to fade, your child will start to gain independence and learn self-direction.

School

One of the best places for a child to create meaningful relationship is at school. Your child's school is likely to have clubs, sports and extra-curricular programs that are great ways for your child to make new friends.

- **Talk with Your Child's IEP Team** or special-ed teacher about adding a peer-interaction goal to the IEP. Ask the team how they can support your child to take part in more school-related activities.
 - Your child's IEP can include transportation home after a school-related activity.
 - Your advocacy skills may be needed to add extra-curricular activities to your child's IEP.
- **Best Buddies** or **Peer Partner Programs** Students are paired together in this mentorship program that helps in the classroom and can form friendships. If your child's school doesn't have one, you can advocate for one. To learn more bestbuddies.org/wisconsin.
- Your child may be part of school-sponsored music, sports or art program with the help of a peer or paid school staff.

"My son loves music! An aide attended high school orchestra practices with him and he handed out programs at the winter concert. It was a great way for him to be part of this group." – FV staff member

- **Booster Clubs** or **Philanthropy Programs** Does your school host fundraisers for charity? Talk with the group(s) organizing these events to see if there's a volunteer slot for your child with the help of a peer or school staff.
- **Service Hours** Many high schools require service hours for graduating students. Your child's special-ed teacher may know students who are eager to help, and get their needed volunteer hours, by going to school-related activities with your child.



Community Recreation and Leisure Programs

- **YMCA and Sports Clubs** Talk to these groups about providing peer support to include your child. Many community non-profits and recreation programs have support people available, so a parent does not have to be there.
- **Service Clubs** Connect with organizations like the Kiwanis and Lions Clubs about projects in your community that your child or YA can join. Also ask if there is a member who can provide support to a person with a disability.
- **Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts** Many scout troops are open to children with different abilities. In fact, the Girl Scouts of Wisconsin Southeast recently received a grant from the Board for People with Developmental Disabilities to make their troops more inclusive.



Children's Long-Term Support Program

Children who are enrolled in the Children's Long-Term Support Program (CLTS) or Children's Community Options Program (CCOP), may be able to pay for a **respite provider** to be a connector and support person in community activities.

- **Inclusion specialist** One example is United Cerebral Palsy's inclusion programs that support children and YAs to participate in community activities.
- **Mentoring** The CLTS Program has a mentoring benefit that allows a child's service plan to pay for a person, other than a family member, to support them in their community.

Definition: Mentoring



Mentoring improves a child's ability to interact in their community in socially advantageous ways. The mentor provides the child or youth with experiences in peer interaction, social and/or recreational activities. Our CLTS fact sheet, [What Services Might be Covered?](#), has more details.



IRIS or Family Care

If your child is **18 or older**, and enrolled in IRIS or Family Care, these programs may pay for a respite provider, a mentor or other personal supports to make it possible for your adult child to participate in community activities.



LEARN MORE

- Our Family Voices of Wisconsin **Winter 2021 newsletter** has steps to find activities and community opportunities for a child or young adult, and how to get around any barriers that may pop up.
- **LOV Inc.'s** Bridge Builder program supports adults with disabilities and younger children covered by CLTS. Contact Stefanie Primm, stefanie@lovinc.org to learn more.



Still Have Questions? Need Help Finding Services for Your Child?

- [Regional Centers for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs](https://dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/index.htm)
dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/index.htm
- [Well Badger Resource Center](http://wellbadger.org) wellbadger.org or call 800.642.7837