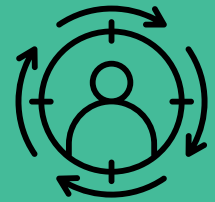


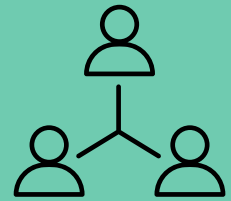
SAFE Tip Sheet



Supporting students' identities



Advancing peer relationships



Fostering belonging



Empowering students with intellectual and developmental disabilities



For students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), intentional support of their identities, the development and maintenance of peer relationships, the fostering of a strong sense of belonging, and meaningful opportunities for empowerment are all critical components of access to positive educational and social experiences. When students feel affirmed in their strengths and identities within the school setting, they are more likely to experience a safe community that encourages the development and maintenance of relationships in other settings. Schools have the potential to be an accessible space that promotes healthy, supportive, and meaningful connections for students with IDD; however, students with IDD often experience negative attitudes toward their identity. This can lead to social exclusion and isolation both in and out of educational environments (Yin & Jodl, 2021). The SAFE framework provides actionable steps to address the barriers that impact relationship building and supports students and teachers in creating a strong foundation of community and connectedness. By celebrating students' unique identities, strengths, and interests, educators can empower students with IDD to strengthen their social relationship skills and create learning environments that allow all students to feel valued, empowered, and supported.

SAFE: Supporting students' identities

Action steps to support and celebrate students' identities:

Cultural responsiveness:

- Interviewing families of students is one way that teachers can learn about their students' cultural identity, communication style, and social norms. Delivering lessons on various cultures can also help to facilitate peer interactions that are intentional and culturally responsive.
- **This might look like:** getting family and student input, observation across settings, and pursuing insight into the specific, cultural, lived experiences of their students.

[Interview Questions for Families](#)
[Culturally Responsive Strategies](#)

Action steps to center students' strengths while supporting students' needs:

Person-centered practice & strengths-based approach:

- Teachers should utilize the shared interests, strengths, and abilities of students to support the initiation of peer relationships
- **This might look like:** Including strength-based questionnaires to guide students' roles, activities, and involvement in the classroom.

[Strengths Based Approach Guide](#)

SAFE: Advancing peer relationships

Action steps to support peer relationship building:

- Teachers can facilitate opportunities for students to engage with other staff members, students, and encourage social interaction with those outside of their daily classroom.
- **This might look like:** dedicating time for social skills practice. Teachers can give students tasks of introducing themselves to faculty around the school. Teachers can facilitate social skills practice within their classroom through the use of role playing games, group activities to target teamwork, conflict resolution activities, and creative outlet projects. When there is a safe space to practice social skills, students are more likely to transfer these skills across settings.

Examples of Social Skills Activities

Action steps to support and honor different modes of communication:

- All forms of communication should be honored and it is important to recognize that verbal communication may not be a strength or option for all students. Teachers should model and incorporate multi-modal communication within their classrooms. **This might look like:**
- Using gestures, written words, ASL, and visuals to support communication.
- Collaborating with the school's speech-language pathologist on incorporating different forms of communication based on students' needs.
- Raising awareness of communication styles and allowing varied ways for students to express knowledge across school activities (e.g., ASL sign of the week, use of core boards in the classroom, and highlighting figures who communicate in ways other than verbal language).

[AAC Core Board Download](#)

[ASL Sign of the Day](#)

SAFE: Fostering belonging

Action steps to support student belonging in school:

- Teachers can utilize resources such as the Time, Instructional, Educational, Support (TIES) Center's frameworks as guidance for understanding and executing an environment of belonging. The TIES Framework is an accessible resource backed by research regarding the practice of implementing the "dimensions of belonging." The framework presents belonging as being experienced when students are **present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed**. This resource provides teachers and paraprofessionals with explicit scenarios and examples through "Belonging Mini-Guides," reflection tools, and guidance in practicing each of the dimensions of belonging to facilitate social relationships within school.

[TIES Framework](#)

SAFE: Empowering students with IDD

Action steps to support students' social and emotional skills:

Mentor programs

- Research shows that implementing peer mentor programs can have positive effects on social skills, learning, and self-determination.
- **This might look like:** advocating and implementing a Best Buddies program at your school.

[Best Buddies](#)

Action steps to support students' self-awareness and self-advocacy:

Supporting students' vocational interests & hobbies

- Teachers can explore students' interests, hobbies, and form a plan for vocation and opportunities beyond school.
- One example is the "EMPOWER" Program at the University of Arkansas, which is a non-degree, 4-year college experience that incorporates social, leisure, vocational, and educational skills for individuals with disabilities. Teachers can model aspects of this program as well as explore post-secondary options such as education and vocational opportunities.

[EMPOWER Program](#)

- Explore vocational days and volunteer opportunities where students visit job sites or volunteer to not only explore personal interests but also provide opportunities to build social connections.

[Job Readiness Guide](#)

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