

Hockanum Elementary School, East Hartford, Connecticut: Buddy Program

A fifth-grade teacher from Hockanum Elementary in East Hartford paired twelve of her students with a class consisting of primary-grade students with autism. The learning goals for fifth-graders participating in the project included 1) learning about disabilities and autism in particular, 2) interacting with children with autism and providing them with educational and social guidance, 3) student planning and implementing their own lesson to a group of children with autism and 4) students reflecting on their experiences regularly. The service goals for the project were 1) to



Hockanum fifth-grader working with a buddy.

teach play and interactive skills to children with autism, 2) to teach these children new vocabulary words and communication and 3) to help children with autism feel safe, secure and happy around other children.

Once a week the fifth grader spent 45 minutes with their buddies. The fifth-graders came to a consensus, using a strategy taught by The School for Ethical Education, to choose the focus of the program for the students with autism (play skills) via the topic of sea life. Using in gelatin sea creatures they had made and aquariums with artificial sea life, they were able to deliver lessons focus of the lessons. Students planned and taught lessons about the ocean and play skills (they present in pairs). The year culminated in a trip to a Connecticut beach.

While some of the fifth-graders had difficulties in school outside the buddy program, they were extremely successful within the program. Most of the fifth-graders expressed an interest in working in the future with people with disabilities. The children with autism increased their interactive skills as a result of the program and developed a positive rapport with their buddies.

Each week the fifth graders reflected on their project experience in a student journal developed by The School for Ethical Education. “The reflection portion of this program is essential because you need to know how your older buddies are feeling,” noted their teacher Mrs. Singleton. “You want all of the children to leave this experience feeling empowered and good. In addition, reflection activities can also be the perfect opportunity for you as the teacher to offer guidance and make suggestions when they are needed.” Mrs. Singleton has noted that teachers that want to replicate this project should, “Offer a lot of modeling for your older buddies. If they learn the correct way of working with the children from the start, success is sure to follow. Plan well; have your time well spent when the groups are together.”