

Case Study – School group pilot March 2019.

P is 10 years old and has autism. She lives with her mum, dad and brother. Her mum self-referred P as she was worried about her being lonely in school. P is now a popular member of our in-school lunchtime group. We meet every two weeks and we take in a picnic style lunch so that everyone can get the maximum amount of time together and also eat lunch as a group. We have our snacks, do a short planned activity and chat. We have thus far decorated reindeer cupcakes, made scrapbooks, played prize bingo and Jenga, made paper tissue floral bouquets and also had a session of Christmas crafts.

When we were developing the idea of the school groups, I asked P's mum if she thought it would be a good idea and if it would suit her daughter and she replied:

"I've just asked her and it's a definite 'yes' from her! I think that's a great thing to be doing at school for inclusion. Really benefit a lot of kids. Thank you."

After a period to recruit and train volunteers, the group has now been running fully since December and everyone is settled.

We asked P and her mum today how they felt about the group and they answered:

"Hi. I've just asked P how she feels about the lunch group and she really enjoys it. She says everyone has fun at it and that the children that are helping at the group are nice and understand her. I think it's a great thing because some days P is on her own at playtime/lunchtime which I find really sad but I know that when the group's on she is feeling included and happy.

She was so happy yesterday bringing her scrapbook home to show me!

Incidentally, Mrs B (principal teacher) phoned me yesterday asking if I thought P would be interested in going to the disabled riding group on Tuesdays. It is on at the same time as your group. I told her I'd ask her but doubted it as I know how much she loves the group. When she came home from school I told her about it. She seemed interested but as soon as she realised the timing she said "no, no definitely not!". She knows what she likes!"

Volunteers: The intake of peer mentors was much higher than we had hoped for: we now have two teams of 5 peer mentors each and this allows for further friendships within the school environment. The peer mentors all seem to very much enjoy the activities as well as the group setting and are very enthusiastic.

H's mum says of his volunteering:

"I think it shows there all different people out there and it gives them the opportunity to help others. Hamish loves to come as he is happy to help others and they also help him".

Another volunteer's mum has told us:

"An amazing, fun and very worthwhile experience, building awareness and confidence for everyone involved...T has absolutely loved it...being a part of something they see as quite special."

The class teacher of all the peer mentors messaged us the following –

"The buddy club brought to us by Interest Link has provided children with an excellent opportunity develop their skills in communication, empathy and team work.

The children are always excited to attend group and I can see that they enjoy the responsibility it allows. They talk positively about the group activities and are keen to chat to the younger children when they meet them in and around the school."

From an Interest Link staff perspective we very much hope to continue with the group and see the positive impact on not only our group members but the wider school community.

Interest Link @ Selkirk High – lunchtime sessions.

Our pilot scheme to run groups within schools has started off well at Selkirk High and is very much supported by the pastoral team and staff.



Our aim was to be able to engage with children and youths who have a learning disability but are not able to access our community groups whether that be due to personal care needs or family issues. Lunchtime can be challenging for our group members as they may struggle socially and do not have an automatic routine with friends.

We also felt that that it was an opportunity to make our volunteering even more accessible by incorporating a micro slot within the existing school timetable and lunchtime feels like a natural chance to do this. Both Donna (assistant coordinator) and myself aim to attend each session as we have quite a high level of activity to pack into the 50 minutes and we need to leave the classroom as we found it too, as well as everyone having lunchtime and the actual planned activity.

We have initially recruited three volunteers, all now in 6th year (including the Head Girl) and we ran two lunchtime training sessions which allowed us to cover our policies and their expected role as well as basic learning disability awareness.

We also had a lunch session with the group members to introduce ourselves and to involve everyone in choosing and suggesting different activities. We have had 5 referrals for the group from the school and only one has thus far proved not viable – he is a regular non-attender at school and we have been unable to reach him or his family at all. The other group members are all attending although one has now moved to another county as per fostering services, and we will miss her! One member has trouble staying within the group setting for the full session but pops in and chats. He is starting to stay longer now.

Everyone was initially shy but as is always the way, groups settle and find their own levels and dynamics. The last two sessions were more relaxed for everyone with everyone chatting and laughing about holidays and favourite films.

The format of the group sessions is as follows...Donna and I arrive approximately 10 minutes before the bell and get set up in the classroom. We take lunch for everyone with us (sandwiches or sausage rolls, juice, fruit and a cookie) and then also everything we need for the activity. So far we have led sessions in jewellery making, pom pom craft and designer cupcakes. For the last session we gave everyone a wooden box to decorate and the plan is too fill this with trinkets of any sort during the holidays for a scrapbooking project after the holidays – this will last until at least October half term and everyone was pleased with the project.

Mrs Crooks (pastoral teacher) told us recently that the members come to see her and tell how what they are doing in the group and how much fun they are having. We are extremely pleased to hear this!!