

OPENING DOORS WITH LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Friendship Circle revolutionizes educational approach to special-needs kids

A knock at the door. Four-year-old Lisa runs to open it. She's been waiting by the window for her Friendship Circle volunteers to come. And now that they've arrived, she leaps into their arms with a smile from ear to ear.

Every Sunday, Lisa gets a home visit while her older brother and sister are at Hebrew school, learning about Jewish heritage and preparing for the holidays. Lisa can't join the preschool program. As a special-needs child with mild autism and retardation, she becomes anxious and disturbed in large groups.

But it's not a problem.

For months now, she's enjoyed Sunday home visits by two teen volunteers from her local Friendship Circle. Mom loves knowing her Lisa is happy and learning about Judaism, and the respite is refreshing.

Every week, the Friendship Circle sends pairs of specially trained teenage volunteers to visit children with special-needs at home. Frequently, the visits focus on preschool-aged children either too young or unable to attend programs outside the home. With Jewish board games, stories, music, and child-appropriate play, these volunteers go a long way in curing loneliness and overcoming obstacles. Volunteers also share their knowledge and training with parents, trading tips on how to make the holidays more meaningful and practical advice for daily living issues.

The volunteers impact the children by becoming a consistent, dependable and caring presence in their lives. Sessions are filled with positive encouragement as the pair play sports and games, complete written assignments and art projects, take walks, visit the park, interact with others in the home and outside, and develop a trusting relationship.

Most importantly, sessions are infused with Judaic spirit for the season's holiday, be it the High Holidays and Sukkot/Simchat Torah in the fall, Chanukah in the winter, Purim and Passover in the spring and Shavuot in the summer—with appropriately themed activities, crafts, songs and games for each.

Sharing hours of fun and friendship, these shared experiences empower children with special needs while enriching the lives of everyone involved. Children with special needs bloom and gain the confidence they need to make the most their abilities and talents. Teenage volunteers learn the priceless value of giving, the curative power of friendship, and the vital importance of integrating these children into our communities. And parents and siblings receive much-needed needed respite and support.

Started in 1994 in Detroit, Michigan with just eight volunteers visiting three children each week, the Friendship Circle quickly attracted other teens, children with special needs and their families. Today, the Friendship Circle is a major organization with more than 62 branches in over three countries.

For more information on the Friendship Circle, visit www.friendshipcircle.com.