

Creative Ideas to Keep Peers with Serious Illness Connected to the Classroom

Welcome Back (students returning to school following a period of absence)

- Make a survival kit for a patient that has not been able to start the school year with the class. The kit may include:
 - Pictures of staff and students with whom the patient may not be familiar
 - Hints written by classmates to describe students' perceptions of teacher expectations.
 - Hints written by teachers to describe classroom rules, procedures, and any additional pieces of advice.
 - Hints written by classmates to describe unwritten rules/social norms in and around the building that students come to learn by being in the building. This is especially helpful when the student is entering a new school or entering after school has been in session.
 - A map of the building including location of classes, location of locker, and a procedure describing locker operation.

- Initiate a school-wide or grade level hat day when the student returns to school. All students can wear various hats or a school can design a hat for all to wear specifically to honor their friend who has an illness. For example, a local school created a hat as a tribute to the patient that included a cancer ribbon on the side. The school donated profits from hat sales and the sixth grade students were permitted to wear that hat for the remainder of the school year.

- Encourage students to wear shirts of the specific color representing the diagnosis of the returning student. For example, if a student returns to school after receiving treatment for a brain tumor, encourage a school-wide 'gray shirt day' in recognition of brain tumor awareness. The color for diagnoses may typically be found on the national organization websites.

- Recognize the returning student during morning announcements.

- Hang a welcome banner for the returning student.

Intermittent (students who miss school periodically or for several days at a time)

- For students receiving chemotherapy, organize a parade or pep rally such as a 'chemo parade' with a send off to include things such as balloons, posters, a human tunnel, and lots of cheers for a student leaving for their final chemotherapy treatment.

- Make and send a scrapbook, to the student, of any events such as fieldtrips or guest speakers that the student may have missed.

- If a student is working on reading fluency, audio record classmates reading books and send the recordings and books to the student so that s/he can read along with the recording.
- Send home school calendars so that the student and parent are aware of special events such as picture day. Even though the patient may not be able to attend school, depending on the day, they may be able to come to school for a special program or picture day. Be aware of large school orders such as ordering of new spirit wear, class rings and yearbooks, as missing an important order such as these can be devastating.
- If the student is attending school between chemotherapy treatments, consider permitting crackers in the desk or a ginger ale in the locker to help with nausea. Create a non-verbal hand signal the student can use to be excused to go to the school nurse without disrupting class (sometimes lying down for a few minutes can help with fatigue and nausea). Clean desktops, locker handles, doorknobs, and pencil sharpeners daily to reduce the risk of the patient contracting an infection. Permit the student to come in early or late one day to practice walking the path between classes or practice opening their new locker. Educate all staff members of the condition including 'specials' such as gym, art, and music teachers.
- Video tape special events such as a pep assembly, basketball game, student class presentations, particularly interesting science labs, or party days during which classmates can give personal video messages to the student.
- Encourage team involvement. If the student is on a team, maintain the student's roster spot, uniform, and locker. Teams can embroider the student's initials onto their uniforms or dedicate seasons/games to the student even if the student was not previously a member of the team.
- Assemble a joke book, including jokes collected and/or created by classmates, to give the student.

Extended (students who may miss school for long periods of time)

- Make and send blankets or cards to the student and possibly other patients in the hospital.
- Write letters, cards, and emails to the student. Encourage 'kid talk' for the content of the letters. Discuss the happenings at school with teachers, friends, projects, sports teams, special events, etc. Other discussion points include video games, movies, and television. Well wishes are always nice, but try not to focus each letter around the illness.
- Ask the school guidance counselor to pull 3 or 4 students each Friday (or a pre-arranged time with the parent) to his/her office to place a phone call to the patient. It is helpful when the guidance counselor brainstorms topics for conversation, with the students, before placing the call.

