

BECOME BEST BUDDIES WITH SENIA-BEIJING

Bridging the Special Education Gap

By Cindy Marie Jenkins



Participants at SENIA-Beijing's 2019 conference. This year's conference was virtual.

Everyone struggles to make friends in a new place. The older you are, the harder it is, but moving as a child can be both exciting and challenging. Some people have had the same friends their whole lives and aren't as open to new people joining their circles. Add in the additional challenges of social or learning differences, and many students can easily feel isolated in their new city.

That's where SENIA-Beijing and their Best Buddies program comes into the picture. According to their website, Best Buddies is the world's largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical and economic isolation of the 200 million people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

But to Janice Bareng-Pineda, organizer of the volunteer Best Buddies program lead by Harrow Beijing and Rong Ai Rong Le (RARL), it means much more than that to all the students involved. "Volunteering with Best Buddies not only gives kids and families time to do something more for the community but

[is] also an eye-opener of what special needs is about. [Volunteering is] a great opportunity for special needs awareness."

While talking to Bareng-Pineda, I kept asking what it is Best Buddies actually does, but the truth of the matter is that it is simply about friendship, companionship, and having fun between children who may not otherwise know one another. While for many schoolchildren, smiling or saying a word happens all the time, every day of their lives, for many of the kids helped by Best Buddies, that can be a milestone. One of the student volunteers sent this after one such successful day:

"I am so grateful for this afternoon! After I said goodbye to you, I met [my Best Buddy] and I asked him how did he feel this afternoon. Unbelievable! He replied with a Chinese work *kaixin* which means "happy." He said it! It was the first time he said a word to me since I met him in June. It means a lot to me."

Finding programs like Best Buddies is not easy in Beijing, especially when few schools,

local or international, have any special education resources, and if they do, the additional costs are too burdensome for families on top of tuition. Another hindrance is that one student's approved and proposed therapeutic plan, usually received by a family after months and sometimes years of evaluations, does not always translate well to another country.

That's part of the gap that SENIA-Beijing has been filling since 2011. Dr. Gerald Anthony, Chairman of SENIA-Beijing, explains how the organization works to help local and international families when they move to Beijing: "One of the fundamental reasons that SENIA-Beijing began was to coordinate people and organizations for those linked to special education with an external expertise listing. This was created with the thought of listing things that are available to parents, teachers, and the local community. Our external exper-

Best Buddies International is a dynamic and growing organization, thanks to the people that



help advance its mission every day. From the Board of Directors to the summer interns, everyone on the Best Buddies team shares their energy and enthusiasm as they work to enhance the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

www.bestbuddies.org

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tise listing that goes out to all our members free of charge includes the contact information of Beijing-based specialists in mental health and special educational needs."

We know that in China, WeChat is life, and so SENIA-Beijing takes their mission where the people need it. As Dr. Anthony describes it, "The WeChat group allows our members to have several interconnected communication channels that give access to resources, organized local events...links to SENIA social media platforms and professional development opportunities such as our current Bridging the Gap virtual conference (www.seniainternational.org) December 4-6 of this year."

In the SENIA-Beijing WeChat group, rarely does a question go unanswered. Resources, spreadsheets with therapists and specialists of all kind are shared freely, and you won't find any one of the 400+ members offering help that sounds "salesy" as one finds in many groups of this nature. Everyone who is there is there to help.

That is how someone might also come across programs like Best Buddies. Harrow Beijing began including Best Buddies in their Leadership in Action enrichment activities in 2019. Students from Year 5 through Year 13 can join the program, engaging the IDD community with all sorts of fun activities like reading, games, arts and crafts, and more. Because of the lack of schools available for this community, many IDD students study in isolation at home or rarely venture into social situations with students their own age. Best

Buddies fills that gap and more for them.

Christina Wang is a Year 10 student at Harrow Beijing, who was paired with Zhichao Gao. She recalls that at first he wasn't sure what they were doing as Best Buddies, yet she "knew he was trying very hard to be in the same place with other people. He tried to join in arts and crafts and played games with us. Sometimes he would run off because there were many people in one room, especially when we had our end of year party. He did not want people touching him but one afternoon, when we were sending them off for home, he crossed his arms with me. I thought it was such a kind gesture."

Even during the COVID-19 quarantines, Best Buddies found a way to thrive through a new e-Buddies program, as Bareng-Pineda described to *beijingkids* last April: "There were 30 youths with IDD paired with volunteers participating in the e-Buddies program. They had video calls every day via WeChat. The program team also prepared different topics for those peers to talk and work out together via video calls. For example, they talked about topics like why we have to stay home, what is COVID-19, how to wear masks and how to wash your hands, and also some action songs the peers could work out at home, like physical activities, dance, handcraft, drawing, and cooking. At the end, we held an online KTV party as a culminating activity."

What an extraordinary opportunity to tie together empathy, socializing, generosity, and gratitude for all families in Beijing.



The smallest gesture means everything when you're buddies.

What are ways that people can volunteer?

- Join the Best Buddies Program through Harrow Beijing.
- Check the new events calendar at <https://seniainternational.org/beijing> for many events that promote outreach and education.
- Reach out to their list of partners or to any of the local organizations to arrange visits as an individual family or a school.



Best Buddies engage in all kinds of activities together!

PHOTOS: HARROW BEIJING BEST BUDDIES ISA CLUB AND SENIA-BEIJING



SENIA-Beijing has the same mission as their parent organization, SENIA. As an association of educators, professionals, and parents, their mission is to advocate for and provide resources and supports for differently-abled individuals. Their vision is to live in an inclusive world where every individual is supported, resources are accessible, potential is maximized, and action is inspired.