

Better Buddies

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Background Information:

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in six children are diagnosed with a Developmental Disability (CDC, 2024). Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) refer to a group of chronic conditions characterized by cognitive and/or physical impairments that arise from a combination of genetic, environmental, and social factors. Across the world, individuals with IDD experience stigma, discrimination, and limited opportunities for social. In the same article, the CDC said that this leads to people with IDD expressing feeling devalued, contributing to internalized stigma and reduced self-worth. As a result, this marginalization negatively impacts mental health, overall quality of life, and the ability to participate in community settings. Social inclusion is essential for promoting meaningful community involvement, fostering relationships, and improving overall well-being for individuals with IDD. A study done on the effect of social participation for students with and without IDD showed that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), “spend 40% of their leisure time engaging in activities with peers, whereas 30% of their leisure time is spent in solitary activities; in contrast, typically developing students spend 70% of their leisure time engaging in activities with peers and only 9% in solitary activities” (Locke et al., 2015). This showcases that students with ASD are spending more time alone than their peers. This discrepancy highlights a potential shortfall in meaningful social interaction in leisure time for individuals with IDD. The gap may be due to a lack of structured inclusive opportunities which reinforce the need for opportunities that intentionally facilitate peer interaction and inclusion.

As for an older population with IDD, a literature review done by Stancliffe et al., inspected the social participation in religious and community groups of US adults with IDD. Overall, they found that 34.4% of adults are involved in community groups and 42.4% are involved in religious groups (Stancliffe et al., 2025). The participants found that these groups lead to higher social satisfaction, social support, participation retention, and new relationships for people with IDD. However, through a survey completed by people in the community with IDD it was discovered that there is an unmet wish to attend a socially inclusive group due to barriers like lack of knowledge of the events and an inability to get there due to transportation barriers. These findings demonstrate that adults with IDD have limited access to community involvement despite a clear desire to participate. However, individuals who do participate in social groups, such as community organizations, church groups, or clubs, reported higher levels of social satisfaction, support, and relationship development. Clubs can act as an accessible entry point into the community, giving people IDD regular, structured opportunities to engage socially. The article shares how people with IDD tend to spend most of their time with their parents or caregivers, opposed to friends or peers. Yet, the ability to make friends and have relationships outside of family is important. Clubs can create environments where people can, and are encouraged to, form peer relationships, helping shift social networks beyond caregivers and immediate family. Stancliffe et al., further mentioned different barriers that come with having IDD that make participating in the community more difficult. Clubs may be able to help reduce those barriers by offering consistent schedules, organized support, and accessible environments.

A literature review done by Novak et al., on community participation and social inclusion for people with IDD demonstrated why clubs are essential for the quality of life (Novak et al, 2013). There were similar findings to Stancliffe et al. that even when people with IDD live in community settings, they frequently experience isolation and have fewer meaningful

relationships outside their family or staff. Further, emphasizing why structured clubs are important. “Opportunities for engagement in clubs and organizations are key pathways to inclusion... increased participation is associated with improved quality of life and well-being” (Novak et al, 2013). This research demonstrates that individuals with IDD benefit from structured, and socially inclusive environments; however, as highlight previously there is limited access. Clubs like Best Buddies are a great opportunity, to create spaces to form meaningful relationships, and where community participation is not only possible but expected.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed by Congress requiring all public schools that received federal funds to give equal access to education to all students (US Department of Education, 2024). The movement toward inclusion continued to grow, and soon after, peer-social clubs were created. In 1987, Anthony Shriver created Big Buddies, which later grew to Best Buddies, at Georgetown University. Big Buddies, or Best Buddies, is a nationwide, nonprofit organization with a mission to establish a global volunteer movement that creates one-on-one friendships, leadership development, inclusive living, and family support for individuals with IDD. It is the largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical, and economic isolation of nearly 200 million people worldwide with IDD. There are now thousands of chapters worldwide in middle schools, high schools, and colleges (Maddox, 2024). In 2013, Colorado State University started its own chapter, and with my own personal membership starting in 2022.

Personal Statement:

From a young age, I learned how important clubs for people with IDD are to reduce social isolation. Clubs like Best Buddies are centered around their inclusivity, pairing students with and without IDs for social interaction, life skills, and school activities. During my high school experience, this club was one of the largest at the school and was a part of student culture being seen as the “cool thing” to do. Each week the classroom would be full of students with and without IDs having lunch together. This club held weekly meetings, monthly social outings, participated in track and soccer seasons, and raised thousands of dollars each year for the Special Olympics. Our chapter would go on to win the 2017 Inclusive Practices Award, was named to the top 30 Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools by ESPN, and two of the members with IDD won prom king and queen senior year. As participants we all made real friendships and got to see, first-hand, how important the club was to everyone and how important it is to feel included. I fell in love with the program and the mission to spread inclusivity. As a junior, I was elected Vice President of the club and went on to be President my senior year. Even in college, I knew this was something I wanted to continue, so I joined Best Buddies in my sophomore year.

I became Vice President of the club, and I have remained in the role for three years. As Vice President, I help manage the CSU chapter by planning and holding monthly meetings, social activities, and keeping in contact with other chapters across the US. We have events like easter egg hunts, field days, pumpkin patches, and balls. We focus on providing a social and creative outlet for the members with and without IDD to interact with each other. We have a chapter size of about 60 people from across the Fort Collins community, ranging from highschoolers to older adults, and this year we held a Buddy Ball raising \$500, which was the highest attended Best Buddies event since the club started. Our student team of eight officers have made a concerted effort to run and grow this club every year. However, we have never

asked for formal feedback from the club. A survey was created to seek feedback for our chapter and to influence future decision making. The results will hopefully highlight opportunities for improvement and set up the club for realistic changes. Through my personal experience with the organization and this survey I hope to demonstrate the value of joining, contributing, and keeping clubs like this running.

Survey Analysis:

Introduction

I conducted a survey on the Best Buddies chapter at CSU, with the hopes of gaining feedback on the effectiveness of the club and making improvements before I leave. Best Buddies is a club at CSU that plans social excursions to promote inclusion among people with and without IDD. This study aims to evaluate member satisfaction and identify areas for improvement.

Methods

Participants

To partake in this study, the participants had to be members of the Best Buddies Club at CSU, or a caregiver of a member. The participants ranged from CSU students to people of the Fort Collins Community with IDD. If participants were unable to complete the survey, it was asked that they reached out for help from an officer or family member. There were 12 responses to the survey. Table 1 shows demographic information.

| Category | Group | Percentage |
|-------------|---------------------|------------|
| Age | 15–20 years | 8.3% |
| | 21–30 years | 50.0% |
| | 31–40 years | 25.0% |
| | 71–80+ years | 16.1% |
| Affiliation | CSU Students | 66.7% |
| | Parents of a member | 16.7% |
| | Members with IDD | 16.7% |

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Table 1: Survey Participant Demographic Information

Procedure

Google Forms was used to create a survey. Participants were emailed through monthly Best Buddies communication that goes to all past and presents Best Buddies members. In addition, the survey was presented at our monthly meeting and where those presents were asked

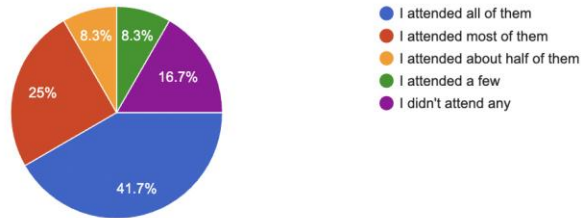
to fill out the survey. There were 20 questions, starting with the demographic information, and a range of question types like multiple choices, open-ended, and Likert scale.

Results

Attendance

Survey responses indicated varying levels of attendance at Monday meetings. A total of 41.7% of respondents reported attending all meetings, while 25% attended most. Smaller portions of participants reported attending half (8.3%) or less than half (8.3%) of the meetings, and 16.7% indicated they did not attend any meetings.

How often did you attend Monday meetings?
12 responses



Satisfaction with Club Activities

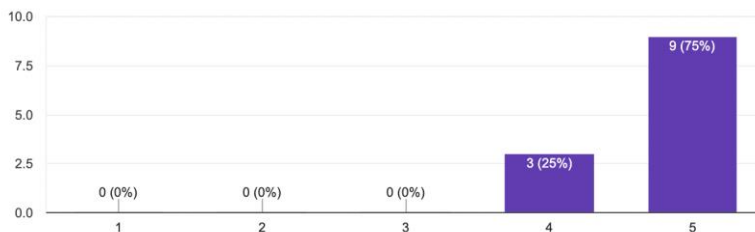
Overall satisfaction with club meetings was high. Most respondents (75%) rated Monday meetings as 5/5 (very satisfied), while the remaining 25% rated them 4/5. The primary reason cited for slightly lower ratings was not being assigned to a buddy pair.

Satisfaction with Saturday outings was also positive, with 66.7% of respondents rating them 5/5 and 33.3% rating them 4/5. Similar to meeting feedback, the absence of a buddy pair was noted as a reason for lower satisfaction.

When asked to rate the club overall, 75% of respondents gave a rating of 5/5, 16.7% rated it 4/5, and 8.3% rated it 3/5. The participant who gave a 3/5 rating again cited not being paired with a buddy as the primary concern.

On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate the overall club meetings?
12 responses

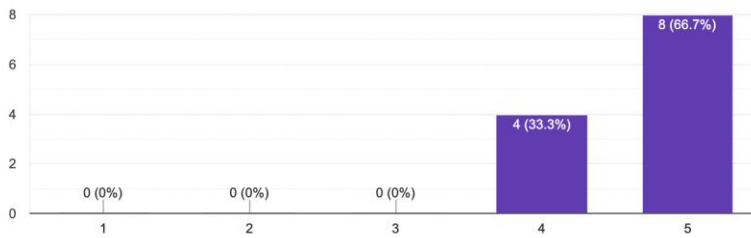
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On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate the Saturday outings ?

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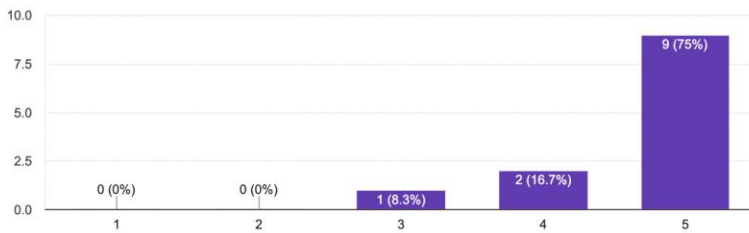
12 responses



On a scale of 1-5 (1 = unsatisfied, 5 = very satisfied), how would you rate the Overall club?

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12 responses

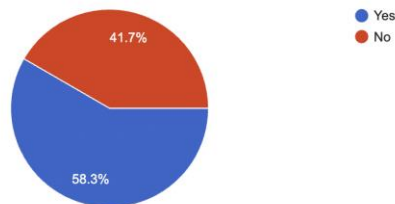


Buddy Pairing

Slightly more than half of respondents (58.3%) reported having a buddy pair during the year, while 41.7% did not. Among those without a buddy, 22.2% indicated they did not want one, while 33.3% reported wanting a buddy but never being paired. This suggests that access to buddy pairing may be an area for improvement.

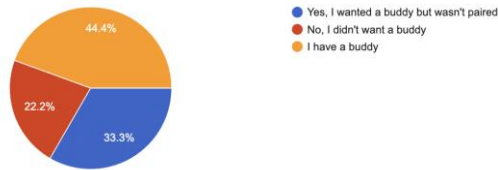
Did you have a Buddy Pair this year?

12 responses



If no, did you want a buddy but weren't paired?
9 responses

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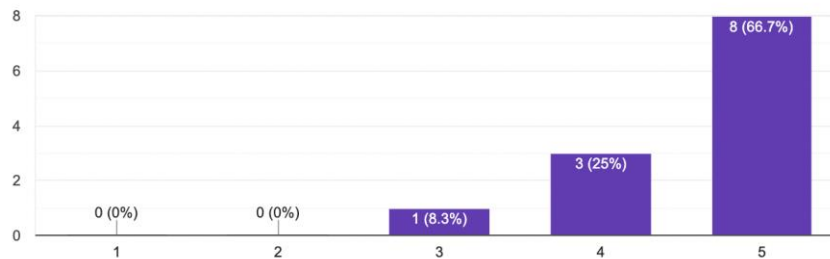


Communication and Inclusivity

Most participants expressed satisfaction with club communication. A total of 66.7% rated communication as 5/5, 25% rated 4/5, and 8.3% rated 3/5. Feelings of inclusion were especially strong, with 83.3% of respondents reporting a 5/5 rating for feeling welcomed and included, and the remaining 16.7% rating it 4/5. One participant noted that “it is a great club, everyone is so supportive.” Additionally, 100% of respondents agreed that club officers were approachable and helpful.

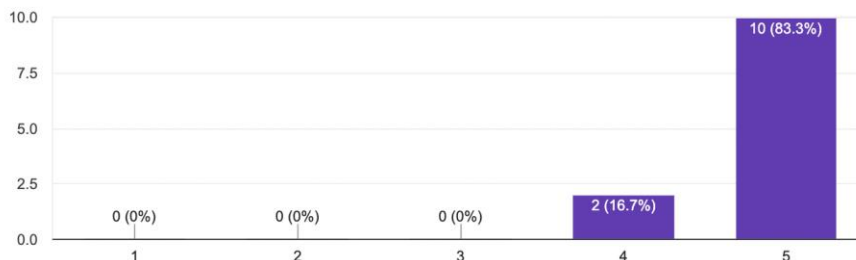
8) On a scale of 1–5, how effective was club communication (emails, reminders, announcements)? [Copy chart](#)

12 responses



On a scale of 1–5, how much did you feel included and welcomed in Best Buddies [Copy chart](#)

12 responses

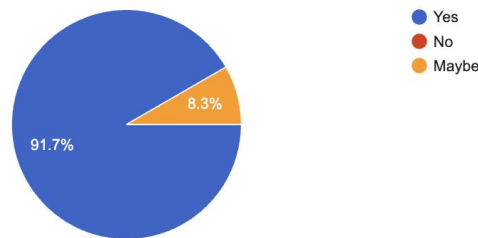


Retention and Future Participation

The majority of respondents (91.7%) indicated that they plan to return to the club, while 8.3% reported that they might return. None of the respondents said they were planning on not returning to Best Buddies.

Do you plan on returning to Best Buddies?

12 responses



Participant Feedback Suggestions

Open-ended responses highlighted several areas for improvement. Participants expressed interest in more events, more engaging and interactive activities, and more “grown-up” outings outside of regular meetings.

When asked what they gain from participating in the club, common themes included friendship, social connection, and enjoyment. Responses included making new friends, developing social skills, feeling included, and having fun. Many participants emphasized the positive and supportive environment of the club. One respondent noted that, “The ability to help others feel seen and included and a chance to make new friends!” (Participant).

Discussion

The results of this survey indicate that the club is highly successful in creating a positive and inclusive environment for its members. Overall satisfaction ratings were very high across meetings, outings, and the club as a whole, with the majority of participants rating their experiences as 5 out of 5. Additionally, most respondents reported feeling welcomed and included, and all participants agreed that club officers were approachable and helpful. These findings suggest that the club is effectively fostering a supportive and engaging community.

One of the most notable patterns in the data is the impact of the buddy pairing system on member satisfaction. Across multiple questions, respondents who rated the club lower consistently cited not being paired with a buddy as the primary reason. While a majority of participants reported having a buddy, a significant portion (41.7%) did not, and within that group, some individuals expressed a desire to be paired, were paired, but their buddies never showed up. This suggests that improving the buddy pairing process and retention could further increase overall satisfaction and member engagement.

Attendance data showed some variability, with a strong core of highly engaged members attending most or all meetings, alongside a smaller group with limited or no attendance. This may indicate potential barriers to participation, such as scheduling conflicts or lack of connection to the club. Increasing engagement through more interactive meetings or personalized outreach may help improve attendance rates.

Feedback from open-ended responses provides additional insight into member experiences. Many participants highlighted forming friendships, having fun, and feeling part of a supportive community as key benefits of the club. At the same time, several respondents

suggested offering more events, more engaging activities, and a wider variety of outings. This indicates that while the club is already successful, there are opportunities to expand and diversify its programming to better meet member interests.

Overall, the findings suggest that the club performs well in terms of inclusivity, satisfaction, and member experience. However, improving the consistency of buddy pairings and expanding event offerings could further strengthen the club and enhance member engagement in the future.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this survey. First, the sample size was relatively small. Best Buddies is a club with about 50 members, but only 30 regularly attending members. Out of this, there were 12 members that took the survey which may limit how representative the results are to the entire population of the club and when generalizing to other Best Buddies Clubs across the country. This limitation is due to nonresponse bias paired with a time constraint. The nonresponse bias could have been due to several reasons, like being too busy, an inability to check their email, or they already took the old survey and did not know this was a new one. In addition, there was only about a week's timeline to take the survey. These things could affect the representativeness of the survey, making it less generalizable to the population of other Best Buddies Clubs. Additionally, results may have been influenced by social desirability bias, as some participants may have felt hesitant to provide negative feedback to avoid hurting feelings. Future studies could mitigate this limitation by creating in-person surveys, to ensure that there are more responses, and being more consistent with promoting the survey.

Furthermore, because the survey included diverse abilities, including 16.7% of individuals with IDD, there is a possibility that some questions may have been misinterpreted across respondents. This could have introduced variability in how questions were understood and answered. Future surveys could address this by simplifying language, providing examples, or helping when completing the survey to ensure clarity and consistency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from this survey suggest that the Best Buddies chapter at CSU is successfully achieving its core mission of fostering inclusion, connection, and community among individuals with and without IDD. Participants overwhelmingly reported positive experiences, highlighting strong feelings of belonging, supportive leadership, and meaningful social interactions. These outcomes reflect the club's effectiveness in creating an environment where members feel valued and engaged.

At the same time, the results identify clear opportunities for growth. Improving the consistency and accountability of the buddy pairing system and diversifying event offerings could further enhance member satisfaction and retention. Addressing these areas would strengthen the overall impact of the club and ensure that all members are able to fully benefit from participation.

Although the small sample size and nonresponse bias limit the generalizability of these findings, the feedback gathered provides valuable insight into member experiences and priorities.

By implementing the recommended changes and continuing to seek member input, the club can build on its strong foundation and continue to grow as an inclusive and impactful community at CSU.

Future Changes:

Regarding the survey and the feedback, there are some changes I would recommend and want to make to Best Buddies before graduating. The main concern was the complaint about the buddy pairing. Buddy pairing is one of the fundamental parts of Best Buddies and is what sets it apart from other clubs. It has been shown to be beneficial to the retention and overall effectiveness of the club, and my survey highlights this as well. Members reported wanting a buddy pair and not receiving one and in turn felt unsatisfied at meetings and social events. At the beginning of each semester, members fill out a buddy interest form, and the officers take that form and pair one member with IDD to a CSU student member. As a buddy pair, you agree to attending events and meetings with their buddies and making them feel comfortable. You also agree to going on one outing outside of a semester one-on-one with your buddy pair. We have experienced a problem with people signing up for a buddy, getting paired, and never showing up which greatly affects their buddy pair. Participants have dropped from the club after being let down by their partner. Proposed solutions include having a meeting with the CSU members to explain to them how important this step is to the club and the commitment they are making. Further setting up follow-up meetings mid-semester with the pair and an officer could help to check in. With these changes, the hope would be to improve retention, and satisfaction with the club.

Another concern was the nature of weekend outings. People reported that they are repetitive and not fit for adults. Best Buddies does events like easter egg hunts, pumpkin patch, visiting Santa, and craft days, which might seem a little childish. However, we have a wide range of ages in our group from 16-80+ which can make it hard to create events that fit everyone's interests. In the future Best Buddies events should have some alternative options that are more accommodating and engaging for all ages. There was also a complaint that our events are repetitive. Instead of doing the same events every season the club should research other events happening in town that month and schedule something new, for example instead of going to the Pumpkin patch every October we could carve pumpkins, watch a scary movie or attend the Pumpkin Parade at the Spring Creek Gardens. These are all new activities that could keep the new and old members engaged. This way, the returning members aren't doing the same thing every year. Lastly, there was a complaint about the nature of our monthly meetings being "boring". In order to make these meetings more exciting we can add things like just dance parties, food incentive and crafts so that the meetings are more than informational. I hope with after sharing these with the other leaders of the club, we can implement these changes and together, we can improve Best Buddies and ensure all the members are getting a positive, impactful experience.

Citations:

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