

## TOPSoccer - A Chance for All Kids to Play Soccer in Needham

In our society today, there are many obstacles that impact kids living with disabilities, often limiting their opportunities and experiences. In 2015 it was estimated by Cornell University, that in Massachusetts alone, there were 48,200 children, ages 2-15, with disabilities. These children are often excluded from participating in some community activities, specifically team sports. Needham Soccer Club is looking to make sure all kids in Needham can play soccer.

TOPSoccer, The Outreach Program for Soccer, is a program, with the mission to give all children, no matter what their ability or disability, the opportunity to play soccer and be on a team. TOPSoccer is a national organization run by the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association. Stacey Keenan, the director; Lee Popper, Kim Christie, Bridget Akinc, and Michelle Hoffmeister run the local TOPSoccer program here in Needham.



Every Spring and fall for 5 sessions, high school and middle school students volunteer as buddies for TOPSoccer in Needham. Each player is paired up with 2-3 Buddies each week. The buddies work together with the athletes (children with varying abilities and disabilities) to play soccer, get some exercise, or just hang out and spend time together on the field. The program started in Needham three years ago with 6 athletes and 12 buddies. This past fall season, 19 athletes and 45 buddies were enrolled, marking a program high and an ever increasing trend in enrollment. The number of athletes is indicative of the increasing impact this program is having on the community, providing incredible experiences for all involved.



TOPSoccer is a very important part of the athletes' lives. Through this program, the children are able to learn important life skills. They not only build up their soccer skills but they learn about teamwork, friendship, and invaluable social skills. The players really enjoy spending time with each other and their buddies and feel like they are included and cared for in this setting. One of the athletes stated: "I love hanging out with my buddies and playing soccer with them".



Many parents have also expressed incredible appreciation for the program. One parent commented, “Our 6 year old has participated in the program...l for the last 2 weeks and last night, he told me ‘I love soccer!!’. It may sound minute, but for us, it’s a very big deal for our son to participate in sports. The buddies do a fantastic job of playing, encouraging and having fun. It may be difficult for the buddies to realize he is having fun, since he’s not overtly smiling or laughing, but believe us, he loves it! Thanks for making a difference in a little boy's life.”



This incredible program, has a huge impact on both the athletes and the buddies. Personally, I can attest to this, being a buddy for the past 4 seasons. I truly feel like every week I spend with the athletes, I learn something new about myself. I have learned to appreciate the little things I used to take for granted in my everyday life. The athletes have taught me about perseverance and positivity. “It's amazing to see them smile and have fun playing soccer with us,” said Sam Keenan, captain of the NHS Boys Varsity Soccer team and regular TOPSoccer volunteer. When asked about what TOPSoccer meant to him, Sam responded, “it's so rewarding to be able to give other people the experience of being on a soccer team. It’s something I love and value so much” Overall, TOPSoccer, while intended to give children the opportunity to play soccer, goes way beyond that goal, and impacts countless lives in the community. It has created opportunities for children with different abilities to play soccer in a fun, supportive, team environment where they can learn and be themselves.

