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## Buddy Baseball gives all students a sporting chance

By Justin George, Times Staff Writer

*Buddy Baseball, which pairs up kids with and without disabilities, is catching on in the area.*

TEMPLE TERRACE - No sport has torn down societal walls like baseball, which broke color barriers.

Now, a program that the Hillsborough County School District is promoting to special-needs students uses the nation's pastime to connect children with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and other disabilities and delays with their peers who don't face the same obstacles.

Buddy Baseball teams special-needs students with typical students on a baseball diamond. This summer, Hillsborough teachers of exceptional student education, supervisors and liaisons endorsed the program. As the school year gets under way, they are making sure the district's 29,000 students with disabilities know about it.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for students with disabilities and student clubs or student volunteer programs," said Joyce Wieland, general director of Hillsborough's Exceptional Student Education department. "It promotes cultural diversity and acceptance of students with disabilities."

Buddy Baseball started last year after Russ Oberbroeckling, a 48-year-old financial adviser, saw his nephew playing in a similar league in Rockford, Ill. He started Buddy Baseball in Temple Terrace, where he lives, through the city's Parks and Recreation Department. The program, however, is open to kids all over Hillsborough and beyond.

Children with disabilities or delays who are 8 to 18 partner with typical children 10 to 18, who are called "buddies." The pair becomes one player.

They hit the ball together, run to bases together and play defense together.

It has made a major impact on the life of Holly Jackson, 14, whose speech and development is delayed.

"You're getting out in the world and interacting with typical and nontypical people, and you're accepted," her mother, Kelly, said.

Holly looks up to her 14-year-old buddy, a girl named Sarah, who reminds her to pay attention and chats with her when they're sitting in the dugout.

"They're just thriving because of it," Kelly Jackson said. "I think it's helped her learn to take responsibility and be part of a team. She's learned to be accountable and part of her teammates.

"She's an extremely sociable child, and it's helped. She's learned to take direction from coaches and, most of all, learned to play baseball."

Buddy Baseball has had two seasons so far, the last fielding 36 players and 38 buddies on six teams: the Bombers, Sharks, Thunder, Hit Squad, Hawks and Ravens.

Early this year, Oberbroeckling, who has been named a "Community Quarterback" by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Temple Terrace Citizen of the Year, approached the school district while receiving an "Excellence in Action" award for his work with children with special needs.

Oberbroeckling, whose two daughters are volunteer buddies, persuaded school officials to help him promote the league, which doesn't get any school funding.

District officials agreed, and now Oberbroeckling hopes to at least double the league's size before this season's Oct. 9 first pitch.

He's looking for more fields to play on. If too many children sign up, he said, the overflow will be asked to join the league in a few months when a second season begins.

As in the games, where no child strikes out, no one's going to be turned away, he said.

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#### **fast facts**

##### **Join the fun**

Buddy Baseball is accepting players, "buddies," coaches and volunteers for this season. Registration closes Sept. 17 and costs \$45 for players. Volunteers and buddies participate for free. The season begins Oct. 9.

Information: Go to

[buddybaseball.org](http://buddybaseball.org) or call (813) 416-5742.

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