

# Personal Relationships Between People With and Without Disabilities

by

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## 1. Why are friendships between people with and without disabilities important?

Everyone needs friends. Friends are people who support us emotionally, who see things from our point of view, who give us feedback (sometimes critical) and cause us to grow. We think of our friends as people who choose us for ourselves, not because they have to, and who will be there for us when we are facing a crisis. With friends, we have opportunities to become involved in community and school activities, to be exposed to new experiences, and to enjoy life more fully. Friendships between people with and without disabilities enrich the lives of both, in many ways.

## 2. When should we begin to think about friendships between people with and without disabilities?

If we want the people we love to be connected to others and a part of their society as adults, we must think about their relationships when they are children. Their classmates and neighbors will grow into their co-workers and friends later in life.

Integrated classrooms and recreational activities are important first steps: in these settings children with and without disabilities get to meet each other. But many parents have found that even though their child is integrated in school, she or he has few nondisabled friends.

## 3. What makes the development of relationships difficult?

Many individuals with disabilities live largely in a world made up of their family, the people who take care of or provide services to them, and others in the programs they participate in. These relationships can clearly be significant and should be encouraged. But outside of family members, people may have no freely given and chosen relationships.

Generally, many people with disabilities face certain disadvantages in getting to know others and forming connections:

**Opportunity.** Too many people with disabilities have limited opportunities to take part in activities where they can meet their typical peers. This can be due to physical

segregation or to having a role as "client" or "special education student." Services may restrict people's chances to get together, through program or funder rules, curfews, transportation restrictions, and other restrictions. Whatever the reason, people with disabilities frequently become cut off and isolated from others.

**Support.** Relationships between people with and without disabilities are not formed by throwing unsupported people together. Some individuals need assistance with fitting into certain settings and activities. Others may need someone to facilitate their involvement or to interpret them to others in positive ways. Without subtle supports, people with and without disabilities might never get a chance to really get to know each other.

**Continuity.** While we enjoy meeting new people, we are sustained by those we have known over time. The continuity of our relationships over the years is an important source of security, comfort, and self-worth. Many people with disabilities do not have continuous relationships: they may leave their families, be moved from one program to another, and have to adjust to staff people who come and go.

#### **4. What are some of the ways to facilitate personal relationships between people with and without disabilities?**

It takes effort to help people establish connections. Described below are some of the ways that this has been tried:

**"Bridge-Building":** Facilitators who initiate, support, and maintain new relationships are called bridge-builders, as they "...build bridges and guide people into new relationships, new places, and new opportunities in life." Bridge-builders involve people with disabilities in existing groups or with specific individuals.

**Circles of Friends or Circles of Support:** Groups of people who "meet on a regular basis to help a person with a disability to accomplish certain personal visions or goals." Circle members try to open doors to new opportunities, including establishing new relationships.

**Citizen Advocacy:** Recruited and supported by an independent citizen advocacy office, a citizen (advocate) voluntarily represents the interests of a person with a disability as if they were the advocate's own. Citizen advocates may take on one or several roles (e.g., friend, ally, mentor, protector), and some of these may last for life.

There are different ways that personal relationships between people with and without disabilities may be encouraged. Perhaps more important than the specific method is the

supporting, connecting role of one or more people--family members, staff members, friends, etc.--who can spend time and energy for this purpose.

## 5. What are some important dimensions of friendship?

Genuine friendships between people with and without disabilities do exist. While each friendship is unique, there are some shared ideas and expectations about what friendship means. According to a recent study of pairs of friends (Lutfiyya, 1990), these meanings include:

**Mutuality.** The people defined their relationship as a friendship and themselves as friends. Although they acknowledge differences between themselves, they clearly found a sense of mutuality in the friendship. Mutuality was expressed in the giving and receiving of practical assistance and emotional support, and enjoyment of each other's company.

**Rights, Responsibilities, and Obligations.** Once a friendship is established, it is assumed that friends can make certain demands on each other and be assured of a response. Nondisabled friends talk about the obligations that they had taken on vis a vis their friend with a disability, such as teacher, mentor, carer, or protector. The friends with disabilities perform certain responsibilities in maintaining the relationship: keeping in touch, suggesting possible activities, and so on.

**Feelings, from Companionship to Intimacy.** All of the friends held feelings of affection for each other, expressed through their actions and how they spoke with each other.

**Freely Chosen and Given.** Friends choose each other. It is this voluntary aspect of friendship that is regarded as the amazing and wonderful part of the relationship.

**Private and Exclusive Nature.** Within the boundaries of each friendship is a private relationship that is now accessible to others. The friends have a history and an understanding of their connection to each other that separates this from all of their other relationships.

## 6. Conclusion/Recommendations

People can establish friendships with each other, but it is not possible to create friendships between others. However, it is possible to create opportunities for people with and without disabilities to meet and spend time with each other in ways that encourage friendships to take root and flourish. Families and service providers can do different things to make such opportunities available.

Families can:

**Work for the total inclusion** of their son or daughter into the regular school system. In addition to being physically present, students with disabilities need adequate supports for the fullest participation possible. Parents can also insure that their child with a disability takes part in a variety of integrated recreation and leisure activities after school hours. A consistent physical presence in each others' lives is a necessary foundation for friendship to occur.

**Insure valued social participation.** How people with disabilities are supported within integrated settings is important. Students need to be enabled to participate as much as possible, and to do so in ways that other people value and appreciate. People without disabilities need the opportunity to meet their counterparts with disabilities as peers, not as tutors or volunteers.

**Involve and trust others.** All parents feel protective toward their children. While there may be differences in how independent people can become, parents can come to believe that there are people in the community who would, if given the opportunity, enjoy and welcome a friendship with their son or daughter.

Service providers can:

**Reduce barriers to friendship.** The way in which support services are provided to people with disabilities and their families can enhance or reduce the opportunities for friendships to develop. By offering segregated programs, the service system dramatically lessens the chances for contact between people with and without disabilities. There are also problems within integrated settings. For example, transportation from school often means that students with disabilities cannot take part in extracurricular activities (e.g., choir, clubs, sports). When efforts are made to bring people with and without disabilities together, the people without disabilities are often treated as volunteers responsible to the teacher or program coordinator rather than as peers.

Many other human service practices present barriers to development of friendships, such as curfews, lack of communication with friends about a person's plans for a day, lack of privacy, and so on. Service providers can begin by recognizing and reducing the practices which curtail opportunities for people to meet and form friendships with each other. They can also encourage people who seem to like each other to pursue the possibilities.

## 7. If you want to learn more...

If you want to read more about the possibilities of friendships between people with and without disabilities, the following provide an introduction to the area.

Lutfiyya, Z.M. (1990). *Affectionate bonds: What we can learn by listening to friends*. Syracuse, NY: Center on Human Policy.

Lutfiyya, Z.M. (1991). *Personal relationships and social networks: Facilitating the participation of individuals with disabilities in community life*. Syracuse, NY: Center on Human Policy.

Mount, B., Beeman, P., and Ducharme, G. (1988). *What are we learning about circles of support?* Manchester, CT: Communitas, Inc.

Mount, B., Beeman, P., and Ducharme, G. (1988). *What are we learning about bridge-building?* Manchester, CT: Communitas, Inc.

O'Connell, M. (1988). *The gift of hospitality: Opening the doors of community life to people with disabilities*. Evanston, IL: Community Life Project.

Perske, R. (1988). *Circles of friends*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press

Wolfensberger, W. (1975). Citizen advocacy for the impaired. In D. A. Primrose (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Third Congress of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency* (pp. 14-19). Lorbort, Scotland: IASSMD, Royal Scottish National Hospital.