

Community inclusion – Enhancing friendship networks among people with cognitive impairment research report

Plain Language Summary of the Report

DisAbility Services funded a research project to look at friendships among people with cognitive impairments. These were people with an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury.

Why are friendships important?

Friendships are important for everyone. People who feel part of their local community and have friends are healthier and happier. This is the case for all people, including those with a disability. The goal of all services should be to improve the friendships of people with a disability.

The project looked at:

- Activities that are successful in making people feel part of their community.
- What needs to be changed to help people with a disability make friends.

This summary has five parts:

- Part one: what are friendships.
- Part two: where people can go and what they can do to make friends.
- Part three: what people said about friendships in the study.
- Part four: what staff are doing to help people with an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury be part of the community and make friends.
- Part five: what needs to be done to make friendship happen for people with a disability.

Part one: What is a friend?

Friends are people you like and know well. Friends share interests and spend time together. They choose to do things together because they like each other. When people are friends, they show interest in each other, they ask questions of each other and look out for one another. Friends make people feel important.

Friendships can change over time. Sometimes friendships can be a bit risky. When you tell someone about your thoughts and feelings, you want them to understand, and you may be hurt if they don't. Sometimes, families or carers do not want the people they care for to be hurt, so they don't encourage friendships.

Friends can be found in different places. Sometimes when people meet, they become friends straight away. At other times, people can know each other for a long time before they become friends.

Friends can be people who have done similar things, or have the same interests. An important part of life for people with an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury is living with their disability. Sometimes, having a disability can be the reason people are friends.

Part two: Where do people find friends?

Friendships can happen from joining in different activities in the community. This might include being involved in a sports club, a drama group, or a group that meets to do needlework. These are groups of people who like doing things together. The more groups a person belongs to, the more likely it is that they will make friends.

The project found it was useful to look at starting friendships in groups where people have the same interests.

Sometimes volunteers can be used as a way of making friends. Volunteers are matched with a person with a disability on the basis of what they like to do. This often leads to the two people becoming friends and doing different things together.

There are also some special programs that teach people the skills of being a friend. People then need to be given opportunities to practise these skills.

Part three: What people said about friendships in the study

In the research project, people with a disability said:

- They didn't want to always do things with their families or carers, they wanted their own friends.
- They liked being friends with people without disabilities and well as with other people with disabilities.
- They want the chance to make friends in the community. To have friends they need help from the people around them.
- Once they left school, friends that they used to have at school disappeared.
- Without friends, life was very lonely. It was also boring being on your own.

Some people who were interviewed in the study had had an accident. They said that it was hard to remain friends with people they knew before their accident because their life had changed.

Sometimes, people with a disability said that staff were their friends. All people need a lot of friends. It is important for people with disabilities to have many different people, as well as staff to be their friends.

Families and carers said:

- They want the person that they care for to have friends just like everyone else in the community.

- It was sometimes hard to let the person whom you care for go out alone and make friends because they worry about them.
- The key is to identify a person's interests and see where in the community they can go. They didn't always know what services were available to help people with disabilities make friends and workers often didn't know either.

Part four: What are disability workers doing about friendships?

In the survey, most workers said it was very important for people with a disability to have friends. But not many services make lots of opportunities for people with disabilities to make friends.

In the past, workers were concerned that people with disabilities needed to learn new skills and be independent. These skills are still important, but having friends is too. Workers said it is important to offer practical help to people with disabilities to help them make friends, such as helping someone plan a picnic or make a telephone call to arrange an outing or suggesting that people do things with their friends after work or on the weekends are all good things to do to make friends.

The project found that most workers thought that friendships were important; however, they did not know how to encourage people with disabilities to make friends. However some staff said that it's not part of their job to help friendships happen and that they are already too busy.

When they did know how to encourage people with disabilities to make friends they would:

- Set up activities where people could mix together.
- Look at the person's interests and think about how these interests could be shared with other people.
- Help the person if they were having trouble with their friends.
- Encourage the person to make new friends and see their old friends more often.

The different types of places where people with disabilities go during the day, in the evening and on the weekends for work or for fun can have a huge impact on the types of friendships that can develop. As a general rule, workers need to:

- Make sure that there is regular contact between people so they get to know each other over time.
- Arrange activities for people with disabilities in the community.
- Smaller groups are better than larger ones for making friends; and

Part five: What needs to happen now?

For people with a disability, making friends and doing things in the community should be an important part of their life. Making friends and enjoying the company of others should also be a goal for every person.

Workers should look at the number of friends the person with a disability has. Things to do include:

- Together, they should make a plan so that the person can see their friends more often. This will sometimes mean their usual program will have to change a little.
- The person may also need some support with transport so they can visit their friends or they can go out together.

Workers should also help people with disabilities to make new friends. This may mean:

- Helping them to find a group that they would like to join.
- If the person really likes football, they might be introduced to the local club members and they can join in club activities.
- If the person wants to get fit, they could join the local gym and be part of the aerobics or swimming sessions.

Everyone has interests, and there are always other people who share those interests. Sometimes they can be a bit difficult to find and workers need to look hard; but there are lots of clubs set up so people can follow their interests.

Many people make their friends through work. This may not always be possible for people who do not work. For some people, working part-time or being a volunteer is a good way of meeting new people. Regular contact with the same groups of people makes it easier to make friends.

Doing things as a group can often be fun. At other times, though, it is good to spend time with one other person. People need different opportunities to mix with their friends:

- People may go to a film or
- Participate in a TAFE course as a small group.
- A person might choose to meet their best friend for a coffee or go for a walk in a park.
- It is also important for employers, and the managers of day programs and houses to be organised so people can mix with their friends in different ways and at different times.

People who work with people with disabilities are there to support people who have a disability. The type of support will be different and should suit the person. Every time a decision is being made about people with a disability, the following question should be asked:

Will the decision help people with a disability be included in the community and make friends?