

# **THE FRIENDSHIP CORNER**

## **Strategies for *Direct Support Professionals* To Promote Friendships Between The People They Support And Unpaid People without Disabilities in the Community**

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Widening the Circle

Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities still live in a world in which they are congregated together and segregated from their peers without disabilities. Kids with disabilities may be sent to specialized schools far from their neighborhood. Even if they go to their local public school, they may be in substantially separate classrooms. Recreational opportunities may be limited to activities with other kids with disabilities. Adults might live in group homes or still in institutions. Work might be in Day Habs or workshops or enclaves.

Perhaps your most important responsibility as DSPs is facilitating relationships between the people you support and unpaid people in the community who do not have disabilities. You may feel that helping people make these important connections is too complicated for you in your busy work, but there are some things that **YOU** can do to enhance the chances of friendships developing and being sustained over time:

1. Do not underestimate **the influence you may have** on people you support. Be a good role-model in the way you look and act.
2. Your relationship to the people you support is important—maybe critical—but **do not “mistake” your relationships as friendships**. True friendships are uncompensated. If you consider yourself as the “friend”, you are less likely to help the individual seek connections with others in the community. Be friendly, of course, and demonstrate other elements that are inherent in friendships, like trust and caring.
3. **Get to know the person you support really well**. List the kinds of things s/he likes to do and the things s/he would like to try. It helps to have a variety of interests that appeal to others, either broadly (Patriots’ fan) or narrowly (growing giant pumpkins).
4. **Read local papers, tour your town, talk to people** to find out the places where the individual can do the things s/he wants to do *with other community members who do not have disabilities*. For some ideas go to: <http://thearcofmass.org/resources/recreation/>.
5. As the person who may know the individual best, you may be able to **advocate at the ISP** (and elsewhere) that social/relationship goals be set that match the individual’s interests. **Include a “relationship factor” within other goals** instead of listing it separately. For instance, if losing weight is one of the individual’s goals, there are some ways to do that that have clear social benefits as well (see #9 & #10 below)
6. **Poll your co-workers, your organization’s Board members, your family, friends and neighbors** to find people who share the individual’s interests. Find someone who is willing to introduce the individual into that activity and to support him to participate. (Your organization may require some formalities, like a CORI check.)
7. **Help the person be as attractive as possible** through good grooming and hygiene and dressing in clean clothes that fit well. His/her appearance may be “judged” through various cultural lenses, so be tuned in to that.

8. **Support the person to act in ways that are as “socially appropriate” as possible.** But do NOT ever think that mastery of social niceties is a pre-requisite for you helping someone find friends. In fact, being in a friendship is often the best way for someone to practice those skills.
9. **Support the person to participate in favored activities on a regular basis.** We are creatures of habit. If the person you support is trying to lose weight and belongs to a **fitness center**, go there on the **same days and the same times**. Being a “regular” makes it much more likely that s/he will begin to know other folks, and begin to be known by them.
10. **Help the person participate in the activities in ways that have the greatest possibility of making connections with others.** If the person is attending the **fitness center** to lose weight, they could do so on one of the treadmills, but the people around him/her are likely to be concentrating purely on exercising, headphones on and not interested in interactions with others. But a “spinning” class—on the same days and times each week—may be a good way to both lose weight and interact with fellow spinners. Or a Zumba class...or yoga...or...
11. When the person you support is in a friendship, it may take some work to maintain it. “Reciprocity” is important in any friendship. **Help the person initiate some activities** instead of always waiting for an invitation. Living in a home that is welcoming to guests can go a long ways here. If the person you support is a sports fan, and if s/he has a big screen TV and a killer hot wings recipe, it might not be too hard luring fellow sports fans over for an afternoon.
12. If more than one organization supports the individual, get to know people from the other organization. It is likely that you’ll need to **coordinate your efforts** as new friendships spread across the artificial boundaries of the service system.

If you work in employment settings, there may be other ways to help people make (and keep) friends at work:

1. Be sure to build relationship-related goals into the individual’s **Person-Centered Career Plan**.
2. Help the individual understand and participate in the **workplace culture**, including knowing food/drink routines, knowing where and when workers gather during breaks, what are popular topics of “water-cooler” chats, figuring out if co-workers celebrate birthdays, are their special days (ie. casual Fridays), etc.
3. Replace the agency van ride to work with **car-pooling** with a co-worker if possible.
4. **Wean from your organization’s job coach** to a more natural support from a co-worker ASAP.

We know that helping people build relationships and friendships is not easy. But it is certainly worthwhile. **People with friends are happier, healthier and safer.** And we all want this for the people we support.

For a broader review of this topic, please read the latest **Quality is No Accident** brief on “Friendships/Relationships”, located at <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/consumer/disability-services/services-by-type/intellectual-disability/newsroom/quality-assurance/developmental-services-quality-is-no-accident.html> to which Widening the Circle contributed.