



Friendships in People with Intellectual Disabilities

DID YOU KNOW?

- 85% of DDS providers surveyed July 1st, 2014 to June 30th, 2015 met the standard for “supporting individuals to explore, define and express their needs for intimacy.”
- National Core Indicator (NCI) data collected from MA DDS service recipients in 2013 - 2014 indicates that 78% of respondents have friends other than family or paid staff.
- NCI data also indicates that 58% of respondents talk with their neighbors at least some of the time.

What is Friendship?

Friendship is two or more people who enjoy each other’s company. They trust, understand, respect and appreciate each other. They look forward to being together. They give to each other, maybe not in the same way, but what is given and received is of great value to each.

- *Widening the Circle*¹

Why Friendship matters?

Good friendships can positively impact a person’s health and well-being. Beneficial outcomes include improved physical and mental health, enhanced quality of life, and greater community connections. Without friendship, people may be more likely to experience negative effects of loneliness such as depression, impaired immune functioning, and harmful levels of stress. Actively maintaining social ties to the community can lead to enhanced job opportunities, expanded networks, community protection, and social skill development.

Approaches to friendship formation may be broad – the more opportunities a person has to meet other people the greater the chance that a friendship may form. Specific interactions can also be effective, such as actively working to match people with a trusted peer or friend in the community. People may need support increasing opportunities to broaden their social networks, developing social relationships, and accessing activities. Once formed, staff can help support people to maintain these friendships.

¹*Widening the Circle* is an extension of the “Real Friends Project”, under the auspices of The Arc of Massachusetts and funded by DDS. Its purpose is to explore the benefits of relationships between people with and without disabilities and to provide information to help individuals engage in and sustain those relationships. Special thanks to Jim Ross and Mary Anne Brennen from *Widening the Circle* for providing content for this brief.

Benefits & Obstacles to Friendship

Benefits

- Increased happiness and sense of self-worth.
- Better emotional and physical health.
- People become recognizable members of the community. This potentially provides safeguards against abuse & neglect, or may result in prompt recognition if abuse & neglect does occur.
- Increased social skills.
- More confidence.
- Reduced isolation and the negative effects associated with isolation.
- Greater sense of community and enhanced connection with community members.
- More meaningful lives and enhanced quality of life.
- Added purpose to existing skill training. For example, learning to cook takes on increased importance if someone can cook for a friend who is invited to dinner.

Obstacles to Friendship

People are generally more at risk for not forming or maintaining friendships if the following factors are present:

- A lack of experience with forming close relationships or in communicating or socializing with others.
- Not fitting in well with the larger community due to personal characteristics, dress or poor hygiene. This might include unusual behaviors or mannerisms.
- Mental health diagnoses such as anxiety or depression that may make socializing more challenging.
- Difficulty communicating in easily understood ways.
- Lack of low-cost or no-cost activities in the community.
- Few opportunities to meet other people.
- Having few or no interests which can be shared with others.
- Inadequate transportation to activities or the community, or inaccessibly places.
- Lack of staff who are available to support community access and opportunities to participate in activities.

Friendships with Community Members

Developing and supporting friendships between people with ID and community members can be beneficial to both parties by providing guidance and companionship. Community members may also gain a greater understanding and appreciation of individual differences, while individuals may gain social skills and an expanded friendship network.

Active matching is one way to form friendships. The North Quabbin Citizen Advocacy (NQCA) is one example of a group who has successfully matched individuals with community members who share their interests and hobbies: <http://nqcitizenadvocacy.org/about/>

Support Strategies for Promoting Friendship

Consider program or staff supports that can facilitate the development of friendships, both peer-to-peer and with members of the general community. There are generally two prerequisites that enable friendships to develop: 1) **opportunity** to meet other people, and 2) the **ability** to develop and sustain relationships with these people.

Promote friendship

- Increase opportunities for people to meet others. This increases the chance that a friendship may result.
- Brainstorm activities to identify what the person likes to do now, and what they would like to try. Identify places to do these activities. Co-workers, family, and friends may be able to help find others who enjoy these activities.
- Include a 'relationship factor' within ISP goals. For example, if weight loss is the goal, can it be done in a social setting?
- As friendships form, encourage **continuity** (multiple opportunities to connect over time) and **reciprocity** (an equal exchange of initiating and receiving contact).
- Coach the person as needed on social interactions. This may include practice with conversation, personal space, or forming 'Get to know you' questions.
- Support people with personal appearance if needed. Good grooming, hygiene and dress can help a person feel and look their best.
- Acknowledge the individuality of each person and consider how friends would best fit into that person's life. Are one-to-one activities a better fit than large community groups?

Peer-to-Peer Relationship Tips

- Encourage participation in local and national self-advocacy groups where people can meet other peers. Mass Advocates Standing Strong (see below) can help connect people.
- Jointly sponsor socialization opportunities with other agencies or programs.
- Facilitate social interactions in the least non-intrusive way possible. Allow people to speak for themselves and try not to interject personal opinions or censor conversation.

Resources

Mass Advocates Standing Strong (MASS): Self-advocacy groups exist in most areas. Contact Marie: mass.office.info@gmail.com 617-624-7549

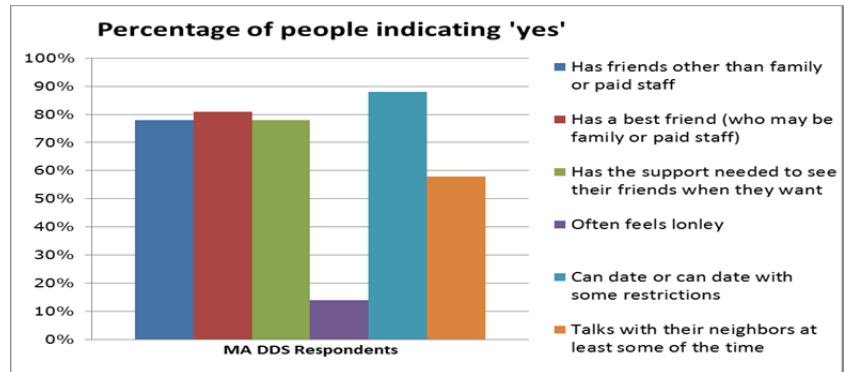
Widening the Circle project and resources specifically around developing relationships: <http://thearcofmass.org/programs/widening-the-circle/>

"Friends: Connecting people with disabilities and community members", a support guide. RTC on Community Living, U. of Minnesota
http://rtc.umn.edu/docs/Friends_Connecting_people_with_disabilities_and_community_members.pdf

INDEX database: search for "Consultants" who may be able to help establish relationships.
<https://www.disabilityinfo.org/>

Friendship Satisfaction

In Massachusetts, the National Core Indicator (NCI) project assessed friendship satisfaction through interviews in 2013-2014 with a sample of people who receive paid supports from the MA DDS. Responses were favorable (see chart at right). **DDS Licensure and Certification data** support these findings. Eighty-five percent of providers surveyed in FY15 met the standard for supporting individuals to explore, define and express their needs for intimacy.



Limited vs. Expanded Friendships

In an analysis of data from Massachusetts and 41 other participating states in 2013 – 2014, NCI found that people with ID who have **expanded friendships** (having friends/best friends that are neither family members nor paid staff) felt less lonely, accessed the community for recreational activities more often, participated in more self-advocacy meetings and exercised more than those with **limited friendships** (not having a friend/best friend, or only having friends who are family members or paid staff).

-Pell, E. (2015, June). *Friendship Matters! Improving Health and Well-Being by Supporting Relationships*. Presented at the AAIDD National Conference, Louisville, KY.

Current DDS Friendship Initiatives

1. *Creating our Common Wealth*: Targeted training to staff and providers about creative thinking in supporting friendships and community connections.
2. *Social Inclusion Policy*: The Department plans to develop a formal policy on Social Inclusion to be developed after receiving extensive input through a series of forums to be held across the state with stakeholders. Larry Tummino will take the lead on this initiative with the help of a steering committee consisting of a variety of representatives from stakeholder organizations.
3. *Widening the Circle Mini-Grants*: Six demonstration projects, jointly funded by DDS and the ARC of Massachusetts, took place between July 2013 and August 2014 to intentionally bring people with and without disabilities together in efforts to encourage and support the development of friendships. Final report: <http://thearcofmass.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Grants-merged.pdf>
4. Widening the Circle will release its *'Building Friendships at Work Toolkit'* in October 2015. This toolkit - meant to supplement DDS' Employment First initiative - will help job developers, job coaches and other employment provider staff maximize opportunities for friendships within the workplace between the people they support and their co-workers without disabilities.

Prepared in Collaboration with
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