

“The friendships are similar (to those experienced by other children). **The children do lots of giving, lots of talking and sharing, but it does come back to them in different ways. She gives it back with smiles and laughter**”.

(Lyle, 2002, p.34)

WHY ARE FRIENDSHIPS IMPORTANT FOR ALL OF OUR STUDENTS?

“If we didn’t have friends we’d all be lonely. **We like helping each other.** Amy helps me when I’m sad... **I was sad** when the helpers (appointed to look after Amy) were taking away my friend. But my buddy (from the senior class) is one of the helpers for Amy, **so I can still go and see my friend.**”

(Lyle, 2002)



Friends are important.

Amy is a 10 year old student with significant sensory, intellectual and physical disabilities.

Friendship

“Friends are very important for Amy, **for her personal growth, the development of her personality, her likes and dislikes ... they help her develop the skill of knowing** which people she likes and doesn't like. People who feel good to her or people who don't. **Certainly she gets a lot of pleasure from her friends,** touching, hugging, contact as opposed to someone she's not so familiar with. They interact with her as a friend not as a babysitter, **so they know her needs** but they don't treat her as a baby”.

(Lyle, 2002, p.34)

Friendships come through as a common theme when researchers ask young people with disability about their social lives. If they are asked what not being part of things means to them, it commonly means having no friends. From a child's point of view friendships may be one of their main motivations for going to school. Feeling lonely and excluded at school follows children into their classrooms. They worry about what might happen in the playground during the next break. Their worry can affect their concentration and ability to learn.

(Alton-Lee & Nuthall, 1992; Morris, 2002; Watson et al., 2000)



Buddy Systems

Buddy systems are a common strategy used by teachers to bring students with disabilities together with their peers. There is a cautionary note here, as the small number of studies that do evaluate the impact of buddy systems on students' social relationships emphasise that being a buddy is not the same as being a friend, and sometimes these systems can cut across real friendships already established, as demonstrated in the first student's story about her friendship with Amy. There are however, also positive accounts in the literature that suggest that buddy systems can be useful in promoting interactions which allow students with disabilities to learn valuable social skills, and such systems can also lead to personal growth particularly in civic responsibility for non disabled peers. To promote high quality interactions it is strongly recommended that students have the opportunity to interact in activities that are not always instructional.

(Hughes et al., 2001)



“Just now it seems too late (for friendships), well it’s starting to get that way. **It’s not as easy as it would have been in the past ...** I like how I can sort of talk to teachers on a, well human level. I mean it’s not like they’re just old people who live at school and come out of cupboards, **you can actually talk to them as people ...** I like to talk to my group teacher who taught last year physics and **I’m extremely interested in physics ... and in pure mathematics...** Like there aren’t many that even know what the natural logarithm is”.

(MacArthur, 2002, p.15)

Research shows friendship experiences of students with disabilities are diverse. Some students have friends whereas others do not. Some students experience unequal relationships, where their classmates treat them as if they were younger than their age and needed care. Others are bullied.

(Allan, 1997; Lloyd, Wilton & Townsend, 2000; Meyer et al., 1998; Rietveld, 1999; Davis & Watson, 2001)



Frames of Friendship

These include

- Best friend
- Regular friend
- Just another child
- I’ll help
- Inclusion child
- Ghost or guest

“Frames of Friendship” have been used to describe children’s experiences of friendship. All of the frames are valued in people’s lives in different circumstances and with different people. Difficulties arise when children become stuck in only one or two frames, particularly that of “ghost or guest” in the classroom.

(Meyer et al., 1998)

Friendships and good relationships with others enable children and young people with disabilities to exercise their rights, be assertive and stand up for themselves. Equally it is the opposite of friendships, loneliness and isolation that heightens young people’s vulnerability to abuse and bullying.

(Davis & Watson, 2001; Pavri, 2001)



Into which frames of friendship do you think these quotes fall?

- He's really special, handicapped. I feel sorry for him.
- To help him
- He is a good person
- He is an integration
- There was them that fancied me if there was nobody else.
(Jenkinson & Hall, 1999, p.1)
- And they never used to come over to me. If I went over to them they would just go away.
(Morris, 2002, p.12)
- I was just friends with anybody who would want to be friends with me until I was 18 when I withdrew into my studies.
(Ballard & McDonald, 1999, p.101)
- I felt a bit out of it socially. I had a few close friends but I did not really fit into a group. She also felt that other students had the same problem.
(Ballard & McDonald, 1999, p.111)

If there is a child in your school who has difficulties in the area of relationships, identifying their friendship frames may help to explore the next steps in encouraging friendships for that child.

Although both students with disabilities and their parents highlight the importance of friendships in school life, studies in schools suggest that they are rarely given priority in planning, teaching, or in the unstructured environment of the playground.

(Davis & Watson, 2001; Lyle, 2002; MacArthur, 2002)