1 Introducing the issues:  
the meanings of friendship

This book arises from a long-standing concern that people with learning difficulties, like everyone else, need friends. They need people they can talk to, go places with or just be at ease with at home. Yet for a variety of reasons, it is not always easy for them to make or maintain friendships. Lack of opportunities to meet people in the right circumstances, lack of self-confidence that they have something to offer, lack of awareness of the importance of this issue among those who work with them - all conspire to hinder the development of real friendships. This, in turn, has consequences for the quality of their lives.

We write on the premise that this need not be so. It is possible to help people with disabilities – even very severe ones – to make and sustain friendships. What is necessary is a recognition of the importance of this issue, coupled with a willingness to take steps to meet it head on. This is not to say that it is necessarily easy. Nor is there one single solution to help friendships develop or to keep them going. The very concept of friendship is a complex one and some understanding is needed of its many facets. There is a range of actions which can and should be taken, both by different people and at different times. Our concern is to highlight the importance of the issue, identify and explore some initiatives which have tried to assist friendships and consider some broader implications for mainstream services.

Although a range of kinds of friends are explored here, this book is purposely focussed on the deeper aspects of friendship. This means the kinds of friends who provide a real sense of closeness and intimacy, sometimes known as ‘special friends’. This focus has been chosen because it is crucially important. The quality of people’s lives is fundamentally affected by the
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quality of their relationships. Among people with learning difficulties, this
issue is only beginning to be addressed. While there has been some research,
for instance, on the nature and extent of their relationships, there has been a
tendency to subsume close friendships within an analysis of wider friendship
– and even acquaintance – patterns.

It is hardly necessary here to spell out why friends are important,
particularly close ones who provide a ready source of comfort. Friends are
people who listen, who understand, who provide the opportunity to share
experiences and emotions, both happy and sad. When something good
happens, friends make it possible to replay and reexamine the experience.
When something disappointing happens, friends can offer solace and renewed
self esteem. The key role close friends play in helping people to maintain
emotional stability has been well documented. The association of such
support with good mental health – and its absence with stress, depression and
poor health – has been a consistent finding from many studies.1

Friendship is something which runs very deep. The sense that someone
else values you so highly as to be a good friend provides an important form
of recognition. As one writer states:

Most students of individual psychology and social behaviour
recognise...that a positive self-evaluation is a requisite for the mental health
of the individual in any culture. It is not as frequently recognised...that such
a positive self-evaluation can come only through social interaction, through
the responses of others to one’s own action and behaviour.2

This is, perhaps, what underlies the stability that friendship brings, for it
means that people’s sense of themselves as valuable, valued, people is
confirmed and strengthened.

It should be stressed from the outset that this is not a study of all kinds of
close relationships or emotional support. The vital roles that parents, siblings
and other relatives play in the lives of people with learning difficulties are not
explored. Nor is the supportive role of professionals, particularly social
workers given attention, except where these turn into friendships. Finally, this
is not a study of the intimate relations achieved through marriage or
long-established partnerships, although again such relationships are central to
the lives of those involved in them.3

An important starting point in undertaking this study was to explore the
meanings of friendship for the research team. It is important to recognise that
the needs of people with learning difficulties may best be understood if those
who are concerned to help them go through such a process themselves. The
issues are in no way different and the parallels are important. This introductory chapter is therefore concerned to explore some issues about friendship in very general terms. It considers what friendship provides people with (its functions) and the conditions necessary for its development. It then turns to the particular relevance of the issues explored to people with learning difficulties. The chapter concludes with a brief clarification of some conceptual issues.

The functions of friendship
At first sight, the idea of exploring the functions of friendship may sound very odd. Friendship is not an idea that is normally associated with utility or functions. Yet, once posed, the question can be seen to have more than one answer. Indeed, it raises fundamental issues of what friendship means to people – what they get from a relationship and what they give to it. We suggest that there are three distinct functions which relationships fulfil for those engaged in them; in order of importance, these are intimacy, company and practical help. These need to be explored in turn.

**Intimacy** The deepest meaning of friendship is a sense of rapport and intimate engagement, having someone with whom to share private experiences and emotions. This is not a matter of being ‘social’; indeed, frequent direct contact may not even be necessary. The key element here is the feeling that a bond has been established, that someone cares and could be available when needed. This bond can be formed in many ways – through shared experiences, through an understanding of common values, through the mutual revelation of private information or simply by experiencing a deep, and probably reciprocal, liking for another person. The resulting intimacy relies heavily on trust – a trust which involves discretion, loyalty and some expectancy of continuity.

**Company** One of the most immediate benefits of friends is having people around – people with whom to go out and do things or simply invite in for a chat. In contrast to the deeper experience of intimacy, this provides a sense of society or sociability, or in simple terms ‘company’. It is not the same as ‘companionship’, which conjures up a particular kind of cosy relationship. Having company is a matter of having people to be with and therefore the opportunity of an active social life. Most people want someone to go with to the movies or swimming; for some activities, like playing tennis, a partner is essential. But most people also like the feeling of just having other people available. It is the opposite of loneliness, in the sense of being too much on
their own. It may, in addition, prove a means to other ends, like going to certain places where they would be awkward alone.

**Practical help** While friendship is not normally associated with practical needs, having a set of relationships with other people enables a person to gain a great deal of practical day-to-day help. This entails all sorts of assistance with the details of ordinary living, including small services, advice or just basic information on a range of issues. For instance, people may want advice when choosing clothes or when buying something for the house; they may welcome suggestions about where to go on holiday; they may need to know how to fill in a benefit claim form. People living on their own may need someone to take a delivery for them, explain how to mend a fuse or do occasional shopping when they are ill. All of these kinds of help are important elements of what people get from some friendships.

These functions have been described in terms of what people gain from a friend, but they could equally be described in the opposite direction – what people give to a friend. Friendship, clearly, is not all about taking – it is about giving as well. It is not simply that people are able to give intimacy, company and practical help to others but the process of doing so tends to be highly important for the giver. Giving can strengthen bonds and a person’s sense of his or her own value to others. This does not mean that reciprocity must always be exactly equal or that it always entails gaining in the same ways.

All three of these functions are important in different ways. People need other people on whom they can call for a favour or to get some kinds of information. At the same time, they need people with whom to spend time or share interests. But the concern here is to highlight the importance of intimate relationships. It is this aspect of friendship, above all others, which provides a sense of emotional involvement and security. Having an intimate friend, even one seen not very often, provides a kind of emotional net. It works on a different level than the other two functions.

A wide range of people can provide practical help, including colleagues at work, neighbours, acquaintances or even local shopkeepers. They are not necessarily people known well. Similarly, many different people can provide company. But there are typically only a few people to whom any one person can look for an intimate relationship. These may not necessarily be derived from the pool of people valued for the practical help provided – or even for their company. Gaining intimacy is not just a matter of working hard for it with those people currently known. There is some kind of personal chemistry which must be brought into play. The people who can fulfil a wish for intimacy may need to be found through different routes than those found for...
company. Those concerned to develop appropriate strategies to assist intimate relationships need to take this into account.

The value placed on intimate friendships differs, of course, from one individual to another. Some people are highly sociable, wanting to spend a lot of time in other people’s company, but have no special wish for closer relationships. Others, in contrast, place a high value on having one or two intimate friends, but have no need to be frequently in the company of others. But people do not always have the particular mix of relationships they most want. A person may have plenty of people for practical help or to go out with but nonetheless feel the lack of one close friend. The key issue for any given person is whether his or her particular ‘supply’ matches the particular ‘demand’.

Differences here may relate to age and gender. It is commonly argued that men have a lower concern to achieve intimacy – or at least achieve it less frequently – outside a sexual relationship. Women, in contrast, may place a higher premium on intimacy and a lower one on company. People may similarly have different expectations from friendship at different ages. Cultural norms may play an important role here, too, with some cultures placing a greater weight on family relationships, for example, compared to those outside the family.

With intimate friendships, it is not quantity which is so much at issue as the quality of the attachment. What most people seek is not a large number of intimates, but one good relationship – or possibly two or three. The key issue is that it will not be many. This can be contrasted to the function of company; having a large number of people who can be asked on short notice to go out to the pub, for instance, means a greater chance of finding someone at any one time. In the case of intimacy, in contrast, although it might be nice to have more than one person with whom to share an emotional problem, it is much more important to have one person who is so close that personal feelings can be revealed without a sense of personal intrusion or embarrassment.

It may be noted that no attempt has been made to define or label people within the broad category of those who might be known as friends. Friendship is notoriously difficult to define. There have been a number of attempts to distinguish, for instance, acquaintances from friends but in practice the one shades into the other. What is important is not to identify which people are which, but what kinds of function any one individual serves for another. Some fairly casual acquaintances might be viewed as potential sources of intimate friendship, while some longstanding partners, who might be expected to be
the most crucial source of intimacy, may not be so. The central issue is not the label attached to a relationship but what people get from it.

One other issue might be added here. This is a lack of attention to people’s formal relationships – that is, whether they are neighbours, kin relations, ordinary friends and so forth. This approach is not by accident. While this is a common starting point for discussions of this kind, such a system of classifying relationships is in fact highly unsatisfactory. It confuses the issue of how people come to know one another with what they get from the relationship. It matters little whether someone providing intimacy in friendship is a relative, neighbour or whatever; what is important is the nature of that relationship.

**Conditions for the development of intimate friendships**

Intimate friendship is not something which can be generated simply because it is wanted. There are essentially two general prerequisites to enable friendships to develop. A person needs, first, opportunities to meet people who may be congenial and, second, the ability to develop and sustain relationships with them. Both of these need to be examined in some detail.

An initial introduction, normally in the form of personal face-to-face contact, is clearly a necessary first step for the establishment of any relationship. For most people, such opportunities present themselves in the course of their everyday occupation. They meet colleagues at work, acquaintances at the pub, other mothers at a local playgroup, fellow students in class and so forth. For others, however, opportunities have to be sought out; depending on their particular interests and abilities, people join social clubs, go to discos or parties or go out in a group in order to meet new people.

Not all contexts are identical, however. The nature of the context is likely to affect the kind of people met, for instance their age, gender and general interests. It may also affect other key issues, such as their future ease of access to one another – whether they come from one local area. But perhaps most importantly, the nature of the context may affect the ability of the people involved to achieve certain kinds of relationship. To give one example, a noisy disco is unlikely to prove the right atmosphere for a sensitive person seeking a close friend.

But meeting people, even with the right interests and in the right context, is not enough. A person needs the ability to generate, and later maintain, social contact, particularly of any kind of intimate nature. This is partly a matter of knowing appropriate behaviour and having competence in undertaking the various moves in the development of relationships – what is commonly
referred to as social skills. But, much more importantly, it is also a matter of believing in one’s own potential value as a friend and one’s own capacity for friendship – having the confidence that one has something to offer. People who feel no one will be interested in meeting them are unlikely to be able to put themselves forward as someone worth taking the time to get to know.

Where does such confidence come from? The answer to this is complex, involving a combination of personal attributes, taught socialisation and experience. Social abilities seem to be learned at an early age from parents, older siblings, other key adults or childhood peers. Confidence may spring directly from the reinforcement provided by success at this time, the knowledge that friends or rewarding social contacts can be made. It may also grow with maturity and the knowledge of competence in other areas as adulthood progresses. But some people seem to have a greater natural ability to make friends, while others have to struggle to overcome shyness and awkwardness in others’ company. How such experiences are met has a crucial effect on a person’s confidence at all stages of social development.

Intimate friendships probably grow and develop in different ways. This may be partly a matter of different individuals’ styles of approaching intimacy with others and partly a matter of the history of particular relationships. In all cases, there is the need for what might be called ‘a sense of affinity’, without which people are unlikely to pursue a relationship. There may also be a need for time; it may take a number of meetings for relationships to develop. In some cases, alternatively, the nature of a relationship may seem clear right from the start. Quite often, there is a tendency to allocate a ‘status’ to a relationship – or a potential relationship – from a very early point. People may even have a pool of people viewed as potential friends, on whom they might draw to develop a friendship, as the need occurs.

Two additional factors are sometimes noted as important to the development and maintenance of a relationship. One is continuity – the expectation that it is likely to continue for some time. In most friendships, people will affirm their wish to make contact again; they may do this through arranging another date to meet or by indicating when or how they will next be in touch. This may be particularly important in the early stages of a friendship. One distinguishing feature of intimate friendships is that people who sense a growing intimacy may pursue their relationship even if frequent contact is not likely to prove possible. And, subsequently, they do not cease to be friends simply because they do not meet.

The other factor is a feeling of reciprocity, that the other person feels roughly the same way about the relationship. It is commonly argued that a
person will feel uneasy about pursuing a relationship that is not reciprocal, especially one of an intimate nature. It can be suggested, however, that this is not a necessary condition for intimacy, although some reciprocity in the sense of both partners’ gaining and giving is important. A person may feel very close to someone, even disclose very private details about his or her own life, without this being fully reciprocated. Certainly, what is exchanged and what people gain from the relationship need not be identical, although it will help where it is of similar significance. Nevertheless, the bond of friendship is perhaps greatest when both individuals assign much the same value to the relationship and recognise that this is the case.

**Friendship and people with learning difficulties**

This framework has been set out in general terms, as it applies to all people, whatever their background, age or capacities. The remainder of this book, in contrast, is concerned to explore such issues in the context of people with learning difficulties. Do they want close friends? To what extent do they have them? What can be done to help them develop new friends and keep existing friendships going?

One central question here is whether the issues raised by friendship for people with learning difficulties are any different from those in the context of the wider population. This is not an issue that can be answered from this research, but the conclusion of two American researchers, following an extensive review of the literature in this field, was that no difference could be found:

> We know of no principles about social behaviour that appear unique to retarded individuals, nor are there any theoretical reasons that affiliative patterns should be guided by different factors in this population.5

The principal focus of this book is how to create the conditions under which people with learning difficulties can make and maintain friends. These conditions in general terms are no different from those described above for all people, but the particular circumstances may well be. For instance, many have restricted opportunities to get out to meet other people simply because of practical obstacles, such as transport and money. More importantly, many lack confidence in themselves. They are particularly handicapped by the stigma associated – often by themselves as well as by others – with their disability. All these are issues addressed in subsequent chapters.

No prior assumptions are made here about who friends might be. They may be other people with learning difficulties or people without any disabilities.
They may be people who began their relationship as professional helpers (such as social workers or facilitators with a self advocacy scheme) but who developed over time a closer involvement. They may be members of a person’s own family – siblings, for instance, or cousins or even someone of another generation, such as a niece or nephew. They may be friends or relations of staff living in hostels or other kinds of residential provision. Who they are may have significant implications for the development or longevity of a relationship, but it should not be assumed to affect its fundamental nature.

**Some sources of analytical confusion**
One problem that besets discussions of this issue in the context of people with learning difficulties is a certain amount of analytical confusion. Three issues require clarification.

First, there is sometimes confusion about the relationship of community or social integration and friendship, particularly in the wider context of general social support. Community integration, loosely defined, refers to the extent to which people with learning difficulties carry out their lives by the same means as other people, for instance, living in ordinary housing or using the same schools or leisure facilities. It is frequently argued that such integration is important in order to achieve integrated social contact, that is social relationships between people with learning difficulties and other people.

This is usefully illustrated by the widely quoted King’s Fund document, *An Ordinary Life*, which states as its goals:

> to see mentally handicapped people in the mainstream of life, living in ordinary houses in ordinary streets, with the same range of choices as any citizen and mixing as equals with the other, and mostly not handicapped, members of their own community.6

The document continues:

> It is only when mentally handicapped people live in the community that they can begin to be guaranteed the opportunity to make a full range of relationships. These range from the casually supportive relationships with shopkeepers and others who provide the cement to community life, to closer relationships with friends who share the same interests, to mutually supportive relationships between two people of opposite sexes or the same sex.7

While such contact is likely to be more extensive where there is such integration, it cannot be taken for granted. Living in ordinary houses, for
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instance, does not in itself guarantee relationships with the other people living nearby. Indeed, there is growing research evidence that people who are living independently often have minimal contacts with other people. Atkinson, one early researcher in this field, notes that it is possible, despite their ostensible social integration, for people ‘to live a life almost exclusively within the confines of mental handicap subgroups, drawing support from designated carers and handicapped peers’. A number of other researchers have come to similar conclusions.

But there is an additional problem here; this is what is often an implicit assumption that the most desirable social contact is contact that is integrated. Social relationships, and particularly intimate friendships, for people with learning difficulties often seem to be valued more highly when they are with non-handicapped people. There are good reasons to argue for greater integration in the relationships of people with learning difficulties and other people. But whatever the importance of the support gained in this way, people with learning difficulties want to – and do – achieve close friendships with one another. A real concern with friendships should focus on what people get from their relationships – not the origin of a relationship nor the individual characteristics of those involved.

A second, and related, source of occasional confusion arises around the concept of social acceptance. As increasing numbers of people with learning difficulties have moved out of long-stay hospitals into ordinary housing, there has been concern about the extent to which they are accepted in their new area and feel part of their local community. Gaining social acceptance is a necessary first step for the development of social support from neighbours or others, but it does not in itself ensure any support, much less intimate friendship. This confusion arises partly when the term ‘community’ is used loosely, so that it refers both to people living in an area and to a sense of involvement with them.

A third source of confusion arises on a somewhat different plane. This concerns the categorisation of social support as a subset of leisure activities. Much of the early research in this area focussed expressly on where people went and with whom – in other words, equating opportunities to make friends with opportunities for leisure activities. Such activities are only one, albeit important, means through which friendships are established. They can also develop through a wide range of other shared experiences, such as education, work, housing or a common interest. More fundamentally, friendship is not always about activities at all; it is essentially a matter of feeling a sense of
attachment. Studies of friendship should not be equated with studies of leisure.

The growth of interest in friendship
Among those concerned with policies for people with learning difficulties, there has been a very recent upsurge of interest in the broad subject of friendships. The publication of a discussion paper in the ‘Ordinary Life’ series is particularly welcome. At local level as well, there is apparently growing concern that friendship is a critical issue, especially where people are living independently. Those working with people moving from hospital, for instance, are looking for means of securing friendships for them. All this, however, is very new. At the time this research was first designed (only three years ago) despite a great deal of concern about where people should live and what they should do during the day, little attention had been given to their relationships with other people.

This neglect, indeed, is quite striking. What attention has been given has focussed much more on the need for some practical help and company, rather than any kind of intimate contact. Most early discussions, perhaps not surprisingly, centred on the role of family and paid staff and was based on an implicit assumption that the people involved had no choice in their attachments. In its discussion of residential provision, for instance, the 1971 White Paper, *Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped*, suggested:

> The mentally handicapped need the security which comes from the personal interest of people they know and trust. Contacts with their own family or with social workers they already know should therefore be maintained, and a new lasting relationship formed with the people in their new substitute home... Anyone chosen to look after the mentally handicapped must be a person able to establish such lasting relationships, but not be over-protective.11

Most policy papers during the following period paid scant attention to this issue. One exception was a publication of the National Development Group for the Mentally Handicapped, which pointed out the ‘needs for companionship and friendship in the same way as everybody else’.12 This gave particular attention to leisure activities and opportunities to make new and develop old relationships, with both handicapped and non-handicapped people.13

It was not until the 1980s, with the growth of pressure for ‘normalisation’ and the greater movement of people out of long-stay hospitals, that a focus on
active relationships might reasonably have been expected. But even at this
time, much more concern was directed to issues of community acceptance and
practical help than to active measures to foster friendship. Some papers did
address the key issues, but they were few and far between. A paper produced
by the National Association of Health Authorities, for instance, pointed to the
need to pay attention ‘to the emotional (ie the development of relationships...)
as well as the physical needs of mentally handicapped people’.14 A document
concerned with people with severe handicaps also paid explicit attention to
their relationships with other people. Particularly in the case of elderly people,
it was argued that the location of their friends should be taken into account
when planning a move, so that contacts could continue.15

Throughout this period, then, as increasing numbers of people have been
finding themselves living in new and more independent environments, little
policy attention has been given to the quality of the relationships underpinning
their lives. With growing recognition of the importance of such relationships,
it is probable that much more attention will be given to this issue in future
policy statements. It will be a hard one to ignore.

Notes
1. The seminal study here is George W Brown and Tirril Harris, Social
Origins of Depression, Tavistock, London, 1978. There are a number of
reviews of the growing literature in this field: see, for instance, Richard
Leavy ‘Social support and psychological disorder: a review’, Journal of
Community Psychology, vol 11, January 1983; and D E Biegel, E
McCardle and S Mendelson, Social Networks and Mental Health: an
literature undertaken with a concern for people with learning difficulties
is provided in Hugh Firth and M T J Rapley, From Acquaintance to
Friendship: Issues for People with learning disability, BIMH,
Kidderminster, 1989 (forthcoming). See also references in the
bibliography to this book.
Competence, University of California, Berkeley, 1967.
3. A few references are provided in the bibliography for those who wish to
read further on these issues.
4. After thinking out these categories, we discovered that Robert Weiss had
previously developed a similar categorisation in his book: Loneliness
(MIT Press, 1973), distinguishing emotional and social isolation.


9. For a particularly moving account of one such friendship, see Craig MacAndrew and Robert Edgerton, ‘On the possibility of friendship’, *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, vol 70, 1966, pp 612-21.


13. Ibid. p 79.
