4 Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

It has been shown that people with learning difficulties want friends, yet often do not feel they have the kind of friendships they need. It has also been shown how some initiatives have made some progress toward helping them find or maintain friends. It remains to draw together some general conclusions and spell out key implications for policy and practice. In particular, it is important to point out some broad lessons for mainstream services, as it is here that it is possible to have the widest impact.

Some barriers to friendship
The value that people with learning difficulties place on having special friends has been a continuing theme. Those who have such relationships describe them with pleasure and some degree of pride. Those who lack a close friendship speak of their need for someone special. Sometimes there is a clear sense of frustration when the need for companionship is not met. The need is typically for intimacy, emotional support or companionship, rather than for practical help.

The fact that people with learning difficulties often lack friends is not surprising. There are a number of barriers to the development of friendships. On simple practical grounds, they are often not able to go out when or where they want, for reasons of finance or transport. If they live with their parents, or indeed in some other arrangement, they may be actively discouraged from undertaking certain activities or pursuing certain relationships (including with people such as citizen advocates, who might help to improve their confidence). In addition, they are subject to prevailing assumptions and expectations; it is...
still a common assumption among many parents and professionals, for instance, that they have no need for friends.

But people with learning difficulties are also victims of their own lack of experience. Many simply do not know the possibilities open to them. If they have never had a close relationship with a non-handicapped person, for instance, they may not consider that it is possible for them to do so. Where they have had little opportunity to experience different kinds of friends, gained perhaps through different kinds of activity, they will not have discovered what (and who) it is that they most like. Other people spend many hours in their teenage (and later) years trying out new activities and relationships. Through the process of trial and error, they learn their own interests, their preference for group or lone activities and so forth. Although often painful at the time, this is an important part of the experience of learning.

Another problem here is that lack of experience leads to inappropriate behaviour, as well as inappropriate interpretations of others’ behaviour. The process of making friends is itself an important part of the experience of friendship – and each time, generally speaking, it gets easier. Where people lack the opportunity to try out such skills, they are not likely to become better at it. They also may not learn, as other people do, how to make the right sense of other people. Moreover, other people may give unclear signals because of their different behaviour towards people with learning difficulties. As a consequence, subtle messages about warmth, interest, response and so forth may be confused or misunderstood.

For all these reasons, people with learning difficulties are often unable to make and maintain friendships as easily as other people. They find themselves dependent on others – in some cases highly dependent – to help them to achieve the kind of lives they wish. As summarised in the recent Ordinary Life discussion paper on the subject:

people with learning difficulties...may be seldom alone, yet often lonely; living with people not of their own choosing; rejected by not being chosen by others. They may have no one to stand with them when things are difficult. They are likely to have many unequal relationships, few opportunities to be givers.1

It is therefore essential for those living and working with people with learning difficulties to be alerted to the importance of friendship and to the things they can do to help. Such people include all workers in the statutory sector, parents and other family members and, finally, the wider community. A few comments on each are provided here.
Professionals  Front-line workers with people with disabilities – nurses, social workers and staff at residential and day centres, to name a few – can play a central role in helping them form and maintain friendships. They need to begin to think through the implications of particular practices for the development of friendships. This is both in a positive sense – how they might serve as a catalyst to the formation of new relationships – and in a negative one – ensuring that their practices do not have the opposite effect. They may be able to use their own involvement in networks of other people with learning difficulties and of other professionals to create new relationships. Attention also needs to be given to these issues by those who run establishments and who make policy about them.

Parents  Parents are not always fully cognisant of the need of their son or daughter for friends. This is in some ways odd, as parents generally place considerable weight on the development of friends among their non-handicapped children. There are undoubtedly complex reasons for the apparent lack of awareness or concern with this issue, some of which have been discussed above. But there may be a reaction to current pressures for normalisation, wanting to keep their son or daughter protected from unnecessary risk. There is some evidence both from America2 and the UK3 to suggest a parental resistance to the concept of normalisation when applied to their own son or daughter.

The wider community  Public attitudes to people with learning difficulties, while probably improving, still have a long way to go. Problems in achieving even acceptance by the local community emerge fairly frequently, for instance when a new group home is opened.4 It has been argued that part of the problem is sheer lack of contact and familiarity and, as this increases, the difficulties may subside.5 Special efforts may need to be made.6 Another reason, however, is the tendency to view people with disabilities in a somewhat different light from other people; as one writer (concerned primarily with physical disabilities) notes: ‘They are likely to be described and evaluated by different standards, criteria and rules of evidence from those which apply in normal social behaviour.’7 This is likely to be even more common in the case of people with a mental disability.

Highlighting the issue  Probably the most critical first step to the creation of better policies and practices for the development of friendship is an awareness of the importance of the issue. It needs to be appreciated that relationships are central to the lives of people with learning difficulties, as for other people. They want
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people they can go to if they have a problem, people to go places with, people just to be around and to talk to. So much attention has been given to the more formal (and visible) services – in particular, residential and day care services – that the need for good relationships has been obscured. As stressed by one study of befriending schemes:

The main thrust of services to date has been to concentrate on meeting physical needs...[and] specialised occupation and training. But the services, society in general and all of us have failed, and are still failing, to see mentally handicapped people as fellow human beings, with the same social, emotional, recreational and human needs as everyone else. At present, the services are primarily concerned with numbers, not with individuals; they can be held accountable for lack of food or lack of heat – but not for lack of contact.8

There is a need for professional training to focus more on these issues, both when people are students and when they are already on the job. Those who have worked solely in a hospital setting for all their professional lives may also need retraining. Such training needs to address existing attitudes and expectations of people with learning difficulties – and how these can be expanded. People with learning difficulties themselves might contribute here; there are increasing examples of their involvement in training of professionals. Needs for friendship and how to achieve it should be explored in both very general terms and in terms of treating each person as an individual. One useful focus here is to encourage professionals to think about their own needs for friendship and the range of their own social activities.

Another route to increasing understanding of individuals’ needs for friendship is through a one-to-one relationship. Many people work in this field and yet do not themselves have a friend with learning difficulties. It should not become a requirement for everyone to do so; this is too personal a matter to be dictated from the outside. But it can be suggested that this is a very pointed means of gaining the necessary ‘feel’ of what people’s lives are like and of their individual needs. Certainly, such friendships should not be discouraged. There are growing opportunities for people to pursue this option, whether in befriending schemes, citizen advocacy schemes or other kinds of voluntary activities.

Parents, too, may need help to recognise the importance of friendship to their son or daughter, especially important where he or she still lives in the parental home. Often parents are unaware of local opportunities and of the ways in which their son or daughter might develop through the experience of friendship. They may also be unaware of the longer-term effects of their
well-intentioned efforts to protect their son or daughter from risk. These are the kinds of subject which workshops for parents or parents’ groups might usefully explore. These help parents to learn from one another, both about particular befriending or other schemes and, more significantly, about the importance of friendship for their son or daughter.

Once people are alert to these issues, they may begin to see many ways in which they are able to help people with learning difficulties develop or maintain friendships. A few ideas are presented here, but there are undoubtedly many others. People need to respond to the needs of actual individuals in actual circumstances. What is important is to give priority to the issue of friendship – not to see this as something to be addressed when everything else is in order.

Taking a look at existing services
Virtually all the initiatives described in the previous chapter were special projects – not part of mainstream services. In some cases, such as citizen advocacy schemes, this could not help but be so, given their concern to remain independent. In others, they were pioneering efforts, often arising from the concern of one or two individuals to try new ways of helping people. Nonetheless, there are many lessons which can be learned from these developments by those providing everyday services for people with learning difficulties. Some of the following ideas arise directly from such initiatives, some from the needs expressed by the people interviewed and some from discussions with others concerned with this issue.

Fostering new relationships
Underlying much of this discussion has been the need to be constantly alert to ways of fostering new contacts and relationships. This is both a matter of introducing individuals to new people and supporting relationships when they have first got under way. People working in day centres and hostels should keep an active eye on any developing affinities and help those involved to meet and get to know one another better. This issue is gaining increasing recognition. As argued by Knoll and Ford, within a discussion of the need to reconceptualise the role of care providers, they should

be sure that nothing about the home interferes with existing relationships with family or friends... Providers must also be prepared to take an active role, perhaps as a temporary intermediary, to aid the growth of a relationship.
Sometimes the steps required are very simple. When two people seem to like each other, for instance, they should be helped to work together – not, as in the case of one woman interviewed, moved to the next room.

Efforts should be made to offer people with learning difficulties a wide range of experiences and activities which might lead to friendships. They need to be provided with much more information on local opportunities. This means keeping up with local activities in which people may want to take part. It also means keeping abreast of local befriending and advocacy schemes. There should be no excuse for those working in this field not to know what is available in their immediate area.

People need information not simply about what exists but what it is like to take part. There is also a need to ease their transition into new arrangements. Atkinson refers to the ‘threshold’ problem, whereby people attend activities but do not make contact with others: ‘It is not easy to make friends simply by attending functions. An inside contact may be necessary, or a confident companion.’ Where befriending schemes are not available to help here, local professionals should consider what they might do to assist the passage into a new activity. They may also need to be on hand where the activity does not prove successful. The person needs to be reassured that some risks have to be borne, as such activities are an important route to finding new friends and relationships.

Close friendships are not easily developed in the kind of environment in which most people with learning difficulties spend their time. They have few places in which they can sit down and talk peacefully with each other. During the day, they find themselves at large and noisy training centres; during the evening, unless they live with their parents or a partner, they are likely to spend time with a lot of other people. Even their social lives tend to be in organised clubs or discos rather than in smaller, more informal environments. The combination of sheer noise and numbers can prove a real hindrance to intimate communication and the development of a relationship.

Those providing services need to look at how they might provide opportunities for people with learning difficulties to meet in other kinds of social settings. There is a need for ordinary small scale social activity – enabling people to have a meal, talk to each other or simply watch TV together. Perhaps surprisingly, this is equally important for those who live at home with their parents, as they often have few opportunities to see friends on a one-to-one basis. It is also important for people with difficulties with speech or other forms of communication.
On a wider scale, those responsible for helping people to adjust to a new community, for instance on being relocated from hospital, should obtain a real feel for where friendships are made in the area. It is not enough, for example, simply to note where pubs are located; it is important to have some sense of the nature of the individual pub – whether it is a place where locals are open to new people. Some church groups might be a valuable source of new relationships. One additional route is inviting new people to come to where people with learning difficulties are; one writer has argued that staff in residential homes should encourage their own friends and relations to take an interest in residents to widen the circle of their relationships.11

**Facilitating choice**
The choices open to people with learning difficulties are often very limited. Even in the case of friends, these are often chosen for them – by parents, by the arrangements of their day centre or through specific projects, such as befriending schemes. Yet choice in friendships is crucial. Several of those interviewed expressed a wish to have some personal ‘ownership’ in the development of their friendships. They wanted the opportunity to mix with people of their own choosing, to have friends they could call their own. People living in their parental home, while often gaining much support from the family connection, also found they had few friends whom they had chosen.

Those providing services need to think out how they can widen the choices available. This question emerges in many different services. People should not be forced together socially to suit the convenience of a day centre or hostel. Even more critical is the decision of who should live together, for instance in a group home. This has been well argued by Ward:

> If you share your home with other people – family, friends, lodgers – you know from experience what a big impact they are likely to have on the happiness, or otherwise, of your own personal life. When relationships at home go badly, the quality of our lives suffers. We become depressed, angry, upset. For people with learning difficulties, the possibility of this sort of problem is high. They are more likely than other people to end up sharing a home with several companions who may not be close friends or even well known to them beforehand.12

This need not be so. Those making decisions about tenancies in group homes should take into account the patterns of existing friendships. Where people are not friends beforehand, real efforts should be made to help them get to know one another better before they move in – and to give them some measure of choice if the relationship does not prove to be successful.
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What is needed is to enable individual people to make their own individual decisions. They have different personalities and interests. Some may have several relationships, but have a sociable personality and want more; others may find that they are very satisfied with one good friend. Some may enjoy the atmosphere of a social club, like Gateway, whereas others may prefer to develop more intimate relationships in the comfort of their own home. There is, after all, no single means of making friends, but many different ones. What is important is to make it possible for people to choose.

Developing confidence

The importance of self-confidence as a precondition for friendship has already been stressed. People with learning difficulties have a particular problem here. It is not only that they often lack self-confidence because they have been afforded insufficient opportunities to develop it. In addition, they tend to face – and often internalise – a certain degree of stigma associated with their situation. There is a need to look for ways of helping them to gain more confidence, to see themselves as people capable of having friends – and being friends to others.

Help with confidence is something which can be built into almost any activity. This is not a matter of social ‘skills’, but of helping people to find their own individual ways of relating to others – to gain a belief in themselves or ‘find themselves’. For the professional worker, this means not imposing one model of what people should be like. Atkinson suggests that social workers may try too hard to create a certain kind of life for their clients, disparaging ‘the model patient image created by hospitals’ but creating a ‘model client in the community’. She argues the need to let people develop and hold onto their own ideas of what they want to be. This view deserves support.

Confidence may also be strengthened from some understanding of the nature of relationships and how to cope with them; some specific help might be given here. People living together need to learn how to cope with conflicts within the home. People generally might need help in learning how to handle the rejection of their friendship – and how to manage when relationships break down. It has been suggested that people can lose their ability to make friends and thereby withdraw from relationships which might otherwise benefit them.

Although this research did not focus on the issue, some training in social skills can also prove important to the development of confidence. Such training should be viewed as part of the regular teaching given by parents, carers and staff in residential and day centres.
Confidence clearly grows where people are taken seriously by others, for instance being consulted about what they want. This should be part of the day-to-day approach of those working with people with learning difficulties. This is also a function of self-advocacy groups and people should be encouraged to join these, where they exist. Certainly, they should not be discouraged from doing so. Such groups, as has been shown, can play an important role. In the same way as traditional self-help groups, wherein people come to accept and live with a particular condition, they provide a means by which people with learning difficulties can come to value themselves. They create an atmosphere of safety through which confidence can slowly be built up. They also provide an opportunity to learn how to cope, through the role models provided by those who have done so in the past. As American researchers have noted:

Participation in a self-help advocacy group helps many persons with retardation to admit their disability, and yet shed the negative self-perceptions that are typically associated with the recognition that one is a member of a stigmatised group. Many members of self-help advocacy groups experience a ‘consciousness raising’ and emerge with the belief that although they have a disability, they have many capabilities.14

For some people, having a citizen advocate may be a more appropriate route for developing self-confidence. The presence of an enabling relationship, on a one-to-one basis, may be more strengthening for the individual. Although the two forms of advocacy do not in any sense compete, citizen advocacy may well lead to more self-advocacy in the course of the development of the partnership.

One issue which arises here is the extent to which friendships are encouraged with all people. Traditionally, friendships were expected to be only with other people with learning difficulties. With the growing emphasis on normalisation, there has been a shift in the opposite direction and encouragement given more heavily to integrated relationships. Both kinds of friendship are potentially valuable and decisions about what or who to pursue should be left to the individual person. Some seek integrated friendships in order to break out of the world of mental handicap.15 Others actively seek friendships among each other as it is in such relationships that they can feel most at ease. There is some evidence that they are more satisfied with their social lives where they accept each other as friends.16

It has not been possible here to do more than touch upon the deep issues of how people with learning difficulties view themselves. It is not clear, for
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instance, to what extent they identify themselves as part of a common group or simply cope with this label created by other people. A number of researchers are beginning to look at the ‘self concept’ of people with learning difficulties; their conclusions will have important implications for the issues both of self-confidence and friendship. Certainly, efforts to provide both support and friendship need to be built around their sense of identity – not work against it.

Helping to maintain friendships
Friendships not only need to be made – they also need to be maintained. Efforts to preserve existing friendships need to have equal weight to creating new ones. This is particularly important where people are moved away from one another, which can prove especially difficult for those who cannot write or who have limited speech.

There is a tendency to assume that the moves made by people with learning difficulties – from hospital to the community, from hostels to group homes or whatever – are almost always to something better. This may, in fact, be so. But embedded in such an assumption is another – that old relationships (in the old area) can be abandoned in the interest of making new ones. This is highly inappropriate in the case of close friendships. These relationships can be very deep, arising from a lot of time spent together. Yet they may be difficult to maintain where people are no longer accessible to one another in their new homes. Similar issues arise around long-standing daytime activities around which many friendships are formed; effects on friendship should be taken into account when people are being encouraged to substitute more varied activities for attendance at a day centre.

Some thought should also be given to the potential to recreate or mend relationships already established. Again, when people are relocated from hospital, it is sometimes forgotten that they may have had some friends in their former community. It is important that these are sought out. For some people, this may be a means of helping them find their cultural roots and sense of identity. Those working with people with learning difficulties might remind them about friends whom they may have forgotten. They may be aware of links lost through moves to a new neighbourhood, both with family and with earlier friends and contacts. Most importantly, professionals should be cautious in any assumption that people do not want contact with old friends or acquaintances, for instance because of a general preference for social integration.
Transportation is a key issue here. In the discussion of initiatives in the preceding chapter, this problem came up again and again. People might meet, for instance, at a course or social club and then be unable to pursue their relationship because of the problem of transport. There are two issues here: the lack of any transport and the suitability of existing transport, for instance for people with a physical disability. People may need direct help, through the offer of lifts to visit friends. It was said that sometimes staff used their own cars to help clients maintain links, only to find that they could not be reimbursed for their expenses. Some flexibility should be ensured here. In addition, there is a need to help people with learning difficulties to use public transport; while a substantial investment of time may be necessary at the outset, this can have a major long term benefit in making them much more independent.

But it should also be remembered that friendships can be maintained even where people do not see each other frequently. Many people have ‘absent’ friends. Indeed, separation can sometimes strengthen a relationship, as people have to make an effort to maintain it, writing to each other or keeping in touch by other means. By doing so, they show each other their feelings for one another and the importance of the friendship. People with learning difficulties may need help in this respect, for instance, in writing a letter or using the telephone.

Some issues and dilemmas

The ‘artificial’ friend

In the preceding section, considerable attention was given to befriending schemes, as they represent the most direct means of helping people to find friends. But one key question underlying such schemes is the extent to which the friendships thus generated have meaning for those involved. Some would argue that the relationships created are inherently artificial. The two people come together with very different backgrounds and expectations. One partner has asked for – or has been judged to be ‘in need of’ – a friend; the other has volunteered to become a befriender. How can they achieve any really meaningful friendship?

There are several issues here. First, it is important to distinguish the origins of a relationship and the way in which it develops over a longer term. It is the latter which is of crucial significance. While the beginnings of any formal befriending relationship are inevitably unnatural, and to a degree imbalanced, it does not follow that all relationships remain at that stage. Many grow and develop into very different kinds of relationships, either slowly or at surprising
speed. The people involved lose the sense of artificiality as they come to know one another better and see each other as friends. This might be compared to computer dating agencies, which appear to be flourishing.

Second, even where a relationship remains uneven and in some way artificial, how much does this matter? Having someone with whom to go out, have fun and gain practical experience is so important that perhaps too much emphasis should not be placed on the fact that it is not ideal. It may represent a lot more opportunity than the person with learning difficulties had before. Such contact and experience may be particularly vital to the development of confidence, which in turn may make it easier to initiate and develop closer relationships in the future. If a relationship continues, it is generally because both people are gaining something from it. If what they gain differs, this may not matter much or at all. Indeed, this is often the case in friendships between people with no disability.

It has been argued that people with learning difficulties, like everyone else, may seek friends for a range of functions – practical help, company and intimacy. The relationships arising from befriending schemes may prove the source of considerable practical help and company, without necessarily leading to the development of a more intimate relationship. It is this issue which underlies the concern about imbalance. But what is of principal importance is the nature of people’s expectations from such schemes – and the honesty with which the relationships arising from them are assessed. Although the potential of these schemes to lead to intimate friendships is of particular interest, it is important that they be valued for what they can do. This does not always entail a sense of intimacy among those involved.

There are many reasons why this is so. Finding intimate friends is difficult at the best of times and having one chosen by an external agency is not likely to be a promising route. The sense of obligation to do something together means that some relationships become highly routinised. The partners tend to develop a set day of the week for meeting and set activities in which they engage. In one case encountered, for example, the befriender met her partner at hospital every Tuesday, after which they went shopping, had lunch, visited her home for tea and then returned to the hospital. While this arrangement suited both parties reasonably well, the relationship could not be said to be typical of ordinary friendships, where activities are not so embedded in routine.

An unbalanced relationship does matter, of course, where it is so one-sided that one person wants it to end. This could be either party, but given the lack of choice and opportunity for people with learning difficulties, it is more likely...
to be the befriender. The ending of such relationships can be awkward and unhappy for both people involved. This does not mean that overall the experience was not worthwhile, but it does suggest that considerable effort needs to be made to avoid such circumstances and to provide support when the break-up occurs. There are no simple solutions here.

One means of reducing the pressure on befrienders is to encourage them to widen out the relationships of the person with whom they are involved. Relationships generated through befriending schemes can be highly ‘closed’, with the person with learning difficulties becoming increasingly dependent on his or her befriender. It is essential for those embarking on a befriending relationship to keep in mind the need to help broaden the number of people with whom the person with learning difficulties comes into contact and, hopefully, feels a sense of friendship. This is not a matter of finding a replacement if he or she has to withdraw; there is a need to extend the total number of relationships, creating a multiplicity of links. A good network of relationships is important in itself (as for anyone) and may help to share what may otherwise be seen as a pressure on the initial befriender.

Befriending and citizen advocacy

It has been shown that, whatever the theory, there is some overlap in what happens in befriending and citizen advocacy schemes. Befrienders may serve as citizen advocates (helping their friend in some detailed way) and citizen advocates may become friends. This can cause some dilemmas for those involved in running schemes. They need to be clear in their own minds what they are seeking to provide. The same kinds of skills, for instance, may not be appropriate in both cases. In some ways, paradoxically, citizen advocacy schemes may provide a stronger basis for the development of close friendships. Whereas befrienders often seek to serve as ‘company’, doing things together, citizen advocates may need to learn about quite deep or private matters – possibly creating a stronger bond.

The professional friend

To what extent should professionals expect to become friends themselves with people with learning difficulties? There are some tricky issues here. As one commentator, looking at the issue much more widely, has noted:

Social workers offer a service which in some ideal world ought to be offered by friends or relatives: help, support and advice, in a difficult and often bewildering world. Yet they are professionals. And there is a kind of bewildering contradiction in the concept of a professional friend.

17
It is increasingly being recognised that social workers need to be particularly careful about taking on too much as a friend for a person with learning difficulties. As one writes ‘Perhaps one of the worst “services” we professionals have done for people with a learning difficulty is to ensure that they relate to paid staff rather than their peer group and other friends.’

While social workers (and others) are inevitably drawn into their clients’ lives, and perhaps become friends, it is important for this to be used to develop skills which can be transferred to other relationships. Professionals are all too often likely to move on; they should therefore ensure that energy is channelled into building other friendships at the same time. On the other hand, if a friendship develops naturally, then the initial role of the ‘professional’ becomes irrelevant. Social workers may need to disentangle what they do in their professional capacity and what is a purely personal involvement.

Some people with learning difficulties consider staff to be their friends. This, in itself, can cause problems for professionals who do not know quite how to respond. Some people working in this field feel they should seek relationships with their clients which are no different than those with their own friends; others consider it is their very objectivity which enables them to be helpful. This issue can become particularly critical when a relationship is likely to come to an end – due to a move from hospital, for instance, or a change of job for the professional. It is thought to be rare for those working in institutions to maintain contact once a move out has taken place.

The need for resources
All the schemes discussed in the preceding chapter were dependent on a considerable amount of resources in addition to the time and help of many people on a voluntary basis. Most of them put a great deal of effort into fund-raising; some had gained some support from statutory sources – both local and national. The details are not so relevant here – but the need for resources in this field must be given due stress.

As in any area, more resources in this field would prove enormously important to getting more done. First, at the individual level, some people are hindered in their ability to make and maintain friendships because they lack sheer cash. Money is a key to many activities – paying for them or for equipment or for costs of transportation. Buying a round in the pub can take a sizeable amount from someone’s pocket. Financial assistance is available for some activities, such as further education, and it is important that people are helped to become aware of what is available.
There is also a need to provide financial support for particular initiatives. Many schemes clearly need the help of a professional worker; those which try to manage solely on a voluntary basis tend to come to grief. As with any small organisation, they have considerable office expenses to meet, including publicising their activities and supporting them. Access – both to people with learning difficulties and to others – is particularly critical here, requiring sizeable expenditure on telephones, postage and so forth.

Often a small amount of money would go a long way. It could help to pay the transport costs of people with learning difficulties, for instance, or reimburse expenses of often hard-pressed volunteers. Befriending schemes often have a long waiting list of people who would like to use them, but are unable to take on more volunteers. Those providing such funding should bear in mind that some flexibility in the population targeted is important. Projects may begin with an aim to help people move from hospital, for instance, but soon find that other people already living in the area equally need their help.

Some concluding comments
Throughout this book, the issues which arise around means of helping people with learning difficulties to find and maintain friends have been explored. Friendship has great importance for everyone. It is probably never more significant than in the circumstances of people feeling vulnerable, which people with learning difficulties may increasingly be. They are, after all, being encouraged to move from environments they have come to know well, from day activities with which they are familiar, and make their way in new circumstances for which they could never be fully prepared.

Friendships are important, indeed vital, but they cannot guarantee to make people happy. With all the attention in recent years to broadening the lives of people with learning difficulties, it is important not to lose sight of their own humanity. They may make friends, but they may also lose them. They may find – as other people do – that relationships can be exceedingly difficult. Friendships are not without risk or without disappointment.

In the end, there is a need to take into account the individual context. Some people will be happy with one good friend; others will search for more. There will be those who find it easy to make friends, while others will have more difficulty. But those who achieve the nurturing and intimacy which close friendship brings will be in no doubt about its rewards. Those who live or work with people with learning difficulties need to recognise this and ensure that the choice to have friends is there.
Notes and references


4. This became a matter of some public attention at the time of our research, following a statement by the health service ombudsman suggesting that neighbours should be consulted before people with learning difficulties were moved into the community (reported, for instance, in *Community Care*, 9 June 1988).


Conclusions and implications for policy and practice


