


The Importance of
Fun & Friendship
in the Lives of Disabled
Young People



Key Messages

- Having fun and making friends are critical elements of a young person's life, happiness and wellbeing. Friendships help build confidence, self-esteem, independence and social skills, which in turn have powerful knock-on effects on home and school lives and on the transition to adulthood. These positive attributes need to be valued, prioritised and actively promoted by those providing support for disabled young people.
 - Disabled young people face a variety of barriers, both physical and attitudinal, in accessing opportunities to make and sustain peer friendships. Experience of these barriers can undermine confidence and lead to self-doubt. Interventions such as those provided by the Fun & Friendship programme can help address this by opening up social opportunities and by building confidence and social skills that enable more independent social lives.
 - Independence works in different ways for different people and for some a level of continued support is necessary. Support from family and professional services is both invaluable and irreplaceable; however the way this support is approached is important. Teenagers need time to be teenagers and enjoy the company of peers.
 - Small changes in attitudes, awareness, training and procedures can make a huge difference while costing little. Many staff in places frequented by young people aspire to be inclusive, but lack confidence in working with disabled young people. Such providers should work to develop the awareness, skills and confidence of their staff in order to enable fun and friendship in their settings.
 - Sustaining friendships beyond the timespan of specific projects requires planning. The on-going value of parent and family support should not be underestimated. We should not take it for granted that all parents will see the need to, or be able to prioritise opportunities for fun and friendship for their child. Securing this needs conscious effort. Services to support disabled young people also need to recognise the value of supporting parents as they adapt to their child's developing independence.
- 

Introduction

Of all the means to ensure happiness throughout life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.

Epicurus

Without friends you don't really feel like doing anything, you know what I mean? There is no point in going out if you are on your own.

Young person, Fun & Friendship

Friendships are vital to our happiness. This is never truer than during our teenage years. Friendships are crucial in developing social and emotional skills which have further benefits in terms of education, home life and a successful transition to adulthood. However, the experience of many disabled young people suggests that society views having friends and a social life as less important for them than for their non-disabled contemporaries. There is a perception that they are people who need to be protected, rather than individuals who can have fun and enjoyment in the company of peers. Having fun and making friends should be prioritised alongside other needs.

This is not just because friends are a nice thing to have. We all recognise isolation, loneliness and exclusion as being profoundly negative and potentially damaging, affecting emotional wellbeing, mental health and success in school and beyond. Yet, at a hugely formative period in their lives, disabled young people can miss out on important opportunities to develop socially, have autonomous experiences and exercise personal choices and preferences.

Many disabled young people face barriers that hamper their opportunities to hang out, socialise, pursue interests, share confidences and relax in the company of peers. These revolve around such things as parental confidence; anxiety and a lack of confidence on the part of the young people; accessibility of both transport and buildings; poor information about accessible activities; and most fundamentally the attitudes of others. None are the fault or responsibility of the young person.

As a result some disabled young people experience the world as being hostile and exclusionary – and many have experienced being bullied or made to feel different. Recognising this, BBC Children in Need established a Fun & Friendship programme, investing £3 million over three years in order to explore this field in a manner rooted in practical action and empowerment. We supported ten diverse projects across the UK to enable young people aged 12-18 to access opportunities to make friends and to enjoy social activities as independently as possible. They were unified by a programme which encouraged and facilitated a sharing of experience, mutual learning, and structured evaluation.

The programme demonstrated how fun and friendship contribute to changes in the wellbeing of the young people and it helped to highlight some of the factors that can enable positive social experiences. We believe that many of the lessons learned have wider applicability and merit consideration by all those who are in a position to influence the lives of disabled young people – parents, professionals, policy makers, leisure and transport providers, and many more.

Significant Themes

Fun & Friendship

Spending free time and having fun with friends is of great importance. The enhanced wellbeing and sense of self-worth that these bring can have positive impacts in many other aspects of a young person's life.

Disabled young people identify isolation as a significant barrier to their enjoyment of life. Social opportunities such as those provided by the Fun & Friendship projects give them the chance to be teenagers – to relax, to be with their friends away from their families and other adults and to have fun.

Friendships are highly valued by young people regardless of the fact that different impairments can mean that their personal experiences of fun and friendship can also differ. These differences need to be fully understood and appropriately supported.

All of this points to a need to take conscious steps to facilitate ways for disabled young people to have opportunities to interact with their peers and develop friendships as independently as possible, exercising their own interests and choices.



Confidence

Friendships, self-esteem and confidence are mutually reinforcing, and permeate all aspects of a young person's development.

Increases in confidence make it easier for young people to talk to new people, to overcome shyness, to be more sociable and to make friends. They feel more empowered to speak up for themselves, to express their opinions and to make choices and decisions.

This new confidence transfers into other settings. Some schools report improvements in confidence and self-esteem leading to higher attainment, greater willingness to become involved in activities, stronger relationships with staff and fellow students, and improved behaviour.

Confidence is both boosted by and further contributes to the acquisition of social, communication and general life skills. The programme challenged and supported the young people to try new things such as handling a budget, preparing a meal or using public transport. Such skills help to build confidence not just in the young person, but also in their parents, who are so important in supporting their child's growing independence. Many parents found themselves reassessing how they viewed the limits of their child's abilities as they witnessed them doing new things.



Independence

In many ways, friendships and socialising are an expression of independence; they can also be drivers of independence.

However, independence does not look the same for every young person and for some a level of continued support is necessary. This concept of **supported independence** is a useful one – highlighting that disabled young people may need different types of support to attain a level of independence.

It is part of the general teenage experience that young people become increasingly less reliant on parental and adult support. For many, independence means having a social life away from their parents. However, for disabled young people progressing along that path can be difficult and may require considerable readjustment for parents and families. In contrast to their peers, for disabled young people the end of school or other support (such as clubs and groups) can mean an increasing dependence on parents and other adults.

Supported independence requires those most closely involved in the life of the young person – family, carers, support workers and other professionals, to continually reassess the nature of the support they offer. This support needs to reflect the young person's development and their choices – and to exercise choice they require information about options. Interaction with friends can be an enriching and influential factor in this process.

*"Being independent doesn't mean you have to do everything on your own or straight away."
(Young person)*

*"She now meets with her mates in town on a Sunday and gets the bus on her own. She has pushed for this and there was no way I could stop this from happening."
(Parent)*

*"Often services are about one person with a disability and their personal assistant, and that is not a real friendship. We work with groups of people and they have peers and friends as well staff."
(Project staff member)*

*"My befriender supports me to be more independent by helping me do things like go shopping and make my own meals... and to try new stuff that I wouldn't normally do."
(Young person)*

Hanging Out

Young people choose to use a wide variety of social settings – from leisure centres to cinemas, cafes to bowling alleys, village halls to shopping centres. The degree to which disabled young people are comfortable using these environments to socialise is hugely affected by physical design, staff attitudes and, not least, by the availability and accessibility of transport links.

The experience of the Fun & Friendship programme shows that comparatively small changes in attitudes, procedures, training and awareness amongst those who provide services to disabled young people can make a significant difference. A first step – as evidenced by many of the projects – is a need to listen to the young people as informed service users and customers.

Many service providers in both the public and commercial sectors admit to being nervous about how to meet the needs of disabled young people – though equally many claim to be willing to address this. Some of the Fun & Friendship projects were able to train and support staff and management in their local leisure services, and help them to overcome this reticence. As a result a number of facilities were able to bring to life their equality policies which had previously had little impact on the experience of disabled young people.

*"At archery class they were terrified. They let us come but they were really scared. After one session the instructor disengaged, and communication became harder and harder. I would prefer them to be honest and then you can remove the barriers and talk about it."
(Project staff member)*

*"I had no experience of working with people with learning disabilities before and the thought was a bit daunting."
(Staff, leisure provider)*

Many projects found that gathering information about the availability of accessible local leisure provision was exceptionally difficult. Yet its absence proved a significant barrier in the way of young people being able to plan activities.

Despite the requirements of equality legislation, some barriers remain simply the result of poor building design. Some projects challenged this directly, leading to some leisure centres reassessing their accessibility and making new adaptations. These included changes to aspects of interior layout such as toilets, changing rooms and hoists – not just the provision of ramps.

We saw innovative ways of motivating improvements in service. In one case the young people devised and presented 'Good Place to Come To' awards recognising good practice in providing an inclusive and accessible service. And a key part of this focussed on staff attitudes. This is a demonstration of how an initiative led by disabled young people can help influence the brand values of providers.

While the impact of the projects has been very positive in most instances, it is, of necessity, localised. There is clearly a structural problem regarding the nature, appropriateness and depth of training of key workers and policy makers which merits further consideration by the industry.

*"We'll still work with young people with disabilities in future but I think it will be harder. It would be good if there was some resource available to help us ensure we have the right equipment and also to get workers trained in working with disability."
(Staff, leisure provider)*

Professional and Statutory Support

The pattern of statutory support is changing, and provision varies between each of the four nations of the UK and between local authorities. Although not all disabled young people are eligible, several projects highlighted the positive ways in which new systems of direct or personalised payments have the potential to promote young people's freedom to choose social activities. There is a need to share examples of best practice in implementing this new provision, and to further examine the needs of those who currently seem ineligible.

Many young disabled people undergo periodic reviews with their social workers. However we found that measurements of whether or not young people are having fun or are making friends often do not feature in such reviews, which can tend to focus on issues such as educational attainment and employability.

By exploring this gap with their local social services team, one project managed to introduce these concepts into statutory reviews. This simple change significantly influenced the approach of professionals and families and helped them plan future support more holistically. At a practical level, this can mean that simple activities like having a friend to visit for tea are now being included in action plans.

There were equally positive changes reported in the context of hospice care for young people with life limiting conditions, where new practices were introduced placing developing friendships and encouraging social interaction at the heart of their provision.

*"My social worker asks me about my friends now and wants to know if I am getting to see them."
(Young person)*

*"I have seen a real culture shift where these issues are always on the agenda. This has had an effect on other service providers – for example the Community Short Break Service now considers ways of bringing young people together to have joint breaks with their friends."
(Local Authority officer)*

Sustaining friendships

The friendships nurtured during the three years of the programme were largely created in the supportive context of structured, organised projects.

However, there is a significant challenge in maintaining friendships independently of an 'organised' environment: seeing what factors and, perhaps, what level of on-going support might be necessary for friendships to be sustainable.

This is not a modest challenge. Some of the changes necessary are societal and cultural in scale, while others, at a micro level - within individual families, for example - recognise the many difficult logistical questions to be addressed.

While it was not originally part of the focus of the programme, there emerged a need to adopt strategies to engage and support parents more directly, for example by encouraging mutual support and information exchanges on a formal and informal basis.

If developing teenage friendships is a period of transition for the young people, it is equally so for the families. However, securing parental buy-in to the concepts of fun and friendship cannot be taken for granted and needs conscious effort. Without it, sustaining friendships and independence beyond the confines of the project is very difficult.

*"A number of the young people we have worked with over the past three years still see their friends on a weekly basis and are socialising as independently as possible. Families and young people report that the project has had a long term impact... We have seen a number of young people refuse to revert back to a time when they were socially isolated and actively push to see friends."
(Project staff member)*

Transport

Public transport is vital in enabling an independent social life and in our work it emerged as a critical resource upon which disabled young people increasingly rely as their independence develops. However, the programme highlighted specific challenges many of which echo the more detailed findings of other organisations including the National Children's Bureau and the Children's Commissioner for England.

For example, we found that even some modern buses with good access and appropriately trained staff can still present problems due to such things as restrictions on the number of wheelchairs they can carry - often only one at a time - thus preventing friends from travelling together.

Other issues which emerged included negative attitudes from public transport staff arising from a basic lack of awareness or understanding of disabled young passengers' requirements. Young disabled people may need practical assistance and patience from transport staff when dealing with ticketing; they might need guidance regarding when and where to disembark; and transport staff need to be aware of ways to recognise and respond to instances when there might be negative responses or bullying from other passengers.

The Next Steps for BBC Children in Need

BBC Children in Need is a funder - not a provider of services. As such we have purchasing power and influence. The experience of the Fun & Friendship programme is leading us to reappraise the priority we give to its key concepts in our funding, and it will be important for us to reflect these lessons in future decision making. We will be actively promoting our findings amongst potential applicants, and looking for their values to be reflected in applications which reach us.

We have also recognised many areas - particularly around the challenges of maintaining friendships beyond the lifespan of specific projects - which require further work, and we are about to embark on a smaller Phase II of Fun & Friendship to explore this further.

We will also seek ways to engage with other funders, service providers and policy makers in all parts of the UK to share our findings and to encourage debate and positive action.

We would encourage all people and bodies who have an interest in furthering the wellbeing of disabled young people to consider these matters and to respond appropriately.

Fun and Friendship in practice

These are some of the messages derived from the experience of our projects about how best to support young people to have fun and spend time doing things they choose, with the people they want to be with.

- Disabled young people need support that is informed by and tailored to their individual needs and wants. Professionals working with young people should recognise the critical importance of fun and friendship in their lives - not as an 'add-on' or extra but as essential to wellbeing.
- It is very important for the young people to be involved in planning and delivering activities. This demonstrates that their opinion matters, promotes confidence in decision-making, and helps young people gain greater control over their lives.
- Projects are a valuable springboard, but they are temporary. To support fun and friendship over the longer term, planning ahead for sustainable, and perhaps less structured, social lives should be built in from the outset.
- By focusing on capabilities, young people can see themselves and be seen by others in a new light. This builds self-esteem and also empowers young people to identify and challenge barriers for themselves.
- Spending time with other young people with similar experiences can help change their perception of their own abilities and build friendships and social skills in an environment where it is safe to try new things.
- Creating a system of "buddies", befrienders or mentors is an effective way to build confidence in developing friendships which can lead to joining in with larger peer groups. There are various models, which range from formal professional arrangements to more informal and peer-to-peer relationships. Where buddies are recruited from a young person's school or local community, and share their interests, this can offer a natural and potentially sustainable route into different activities.
- Engaging in challenging new activities helps develop skills and fosters a sense of achievement and bonding with peers. Trips involving overnight stays with friends and without parents can be particularly powerful. However, it is just as important, and ultimately more sustainable, to recognise the value of every-day activities –meals out, going to the cinema or leisure centre, catching the bus into town with friends to meet socially or go shopping.
- Building trust with parents or carers can be the key to supporting them – and challenging them - in developing their child's independence.
- Staff in leisure and transport services need training to develop confidence and know-how in supporting disabled young people. There is great value in promoting good practice – and this starts with listening to the experiences of disabled young people.

The Ten Fun & Friendship Projects

The Autistic Society of Greater Manchester (ASGMA) – Aspirations Project

The 'Aspirations' project supported young people from across Manchester with higher functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome. One-to-one support and group activities were used to build skills and confidence to choose and enjoy social and leisure activities both at ASGMA's regular youth clubs and in the wider community.

Chestnut Tree House Hospice, West Sussex – Fun and Friendship Transition Project

Chestnut Tree House helped life-limited and life-threatened young people to enjoy social and leisure activities as independently as possible in their own communities and as part of a regular youth group.

The Children's Society – PACT – the Fun and Friendship Scheme, York

PACT worked with disabled young people to develop the self-confidence and skills they need to access the friends and activities that they have identified as being important to them. They also involved the young people in statutory review processes and in training local leisure staff to increase their confidence in working with disabled young people.

Compass Advocacy Network Ltd., Northern Ireland – Project S.INC

'Project S.INC' empowered young people with learning disabilities in the Causeway area of Northern Ireland to identify and participate in mainstream youth, community, sports and leisure provision both individually and in groups. They also worked to improve disability awareness in local communities and amongst local leisure providers.

Interchange Trust, North London – WAC Wonderweb

A multi-media web-based project for young people with learning difficulties and/or autism, WAC Wonderweb helped its members develop an exciting website equipped with its own radio station, blogs, video, podcasts and audio content. The young people could explore, create and display their achievements on the website, enabling them to interact, both directly and via the internet, with others of a similar age and background.

Mencap Cymru – Play Our Way Project

The 'Play Our Way' project aimed to empower young people with a learning disability to create sustainable opportunities for independent leisure and socialising. By collaborating in stimulating and exciting activities, young people from different schools were encouraged to form groups and to build close friendships. The project challenged the perceptions and fears of the young people and of their parents, instructors and leisure providers, allowing them to accomplish things they had not thought were possible.

Whizz Kidz – Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – Kidz Together Now! Project

'Kidz Together Now!' extended the network of Ambassador Clubs for young wheelchair-users in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Clubs met on a regular basis, providing opportunities to make new friends. Through this, members were supported and encouraged to network and socialise with their peers and to identify, devise and carry out campaigns focused on issues which they wish to address.

Scottish Spina Bifida Association, Scotland – Support Enable Access (SEA) Change

This project provided one-to-one support for young people aged 12-18 with Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus to access social and sporting activities of their choice as well as group activities. It promoted new levels of independence outside the home environment.

The Yard Adventure Centre, Edinburgh – Youth Clubs @ The Yard

The Yard provided new opportunities for young people with a range of physical and learning disabilities to participate in social and sporting activities with their peers, independently of their parents and carers both within and outside the club environment.

Zinc Arts, Essex – Launch Pad

'Launch Pad' worked with young people with sensory and physical disabilities, offering them opportunities to collaborate creatively together through residencies and activity days. Young people from a wide area were also supported to identify and participate in creative and social activities within their local communities.

bbc.co.uk/pudsey



Further details of the Fun & Friendship programme, including the full evaluation report, can be accessed via bbc.co.uk/pudsey. We would welcome any and all feedback on these matters.