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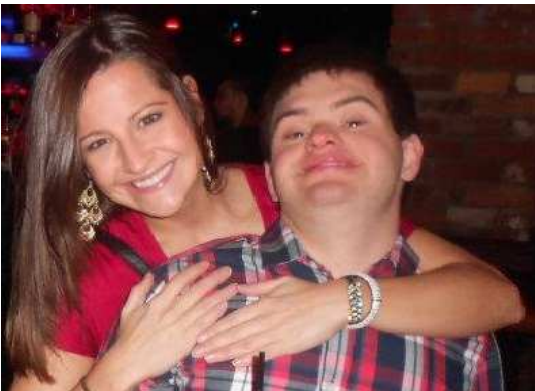
Friendship is for Everyone: The Real Friends Project

Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow; Don't walk behind me, I may not lead; Walk beside me, and just be my friend.

Albert Camus (1913-1960) French novelist, essayist and dramatist.

Friendships are important elements of our lives. They enrich us as people and make life much more interesting and enjoyable. Friends are there to share our interests and values, support us when we need help and celebrate our accomplishments. The sources of our friendships are often our shared experiences.

In a survey conducted by the MA Department of Developmental Services, the lack of meaningful friendships and loneliness was consistently one of the major problems for individuals with developmental disabilities. People with disabilities, in many cases, have a disadvantage in forming and sustaining friendships. These limitations may occur for a number of reasons including poverty, isolation and segregation, low self-esteem, lack of transportation and poor social skills.



Families need to think about, plan and whenever possible, set aside money to pay for social experiences for their loved ones. There are an increasing number of formal programs and informal opportunities in Massachusetts that *consciously* seek to help people with disabilities connect with others and form *valued* relationships that might blossom into friendships. The ARC of Massachusetts through funding from the MA Department of Developmental Disabilities is hosting **The Real Friends Project** (www.arcmass.org).

Jim Ross, along with Mary Ann Brennan, is leading **The Real Friends Project**. We had the opportunity to speak with Jim about this project. He defines the primary focus of the project as, "Facilitating the building of relationships between individuals with and without disabilities by identifying and developing resources for individuals, families and organizations."

Jim explains that this listing of resources aims to be ambitious. "Currently, there are many opportunities for individuals with disabilities to be together. This can be a very positive thing when it is the choice of an individual; the self-advocacy movement of people with developmental and intellectual disabilities and the independent living movement started by people primarily with physical disabilities, are great examples of how people with disabilities, working together, can accomplish great things-like establishing the Personal Care Attendant (PCA) system. But too often our 'systems' conspire to group people together just because of their disabilities; 'special needs' classrooms, segregated recreational programs and group homes are examples. The project will seek to promote the idea that someone's peers may be much more than other people who just happen to share a disability. For instance, this could be a person who goes to their

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church or who loves fishing.”

A further ambitious aspect of the program is contained in its title. The “Real” in Real Friends refers to a focus on in-person connections, not just communication over the internet. Facebook and social networks may be tools to meet people or sustain relationships but they cannot be substitutes for face-to-face friendships. A parent of any teenager today understands the type of challenge this represents.

Friendships are critically important as it has been proven that people with friends are happier, healthier and safer. Please contact Jim (jbriii@comcast.net) if you know of any efforts that you feel are effectively helping people with disabilities expand their social connections and establish relationships.

Resources for Establishing and Supporting Friendships for People with Disabilities

Generally an individual with disabilities’ universe of relationships may be defined as their family, their peers, paid staff members and freely given time from individuals. There are many different programs available to support and establish relationships, and they include:

Social skills training or coaching that enhances an individual’s ability to participate successfully in a friendship. The goal of these programs is to introduce communication and behavior skills around building relationships. The programs provide a starting point for the participant to then practice and apply to the people they interact with in their own life situations.

Disability awareness training, both informal and formal. This approach aims to remove the mystery and fear of individuals with disabilities so people will be more likely to interact and include them. An example of informal disability training occurs when the parent of a child with disabilities contacts their teacher and comes to talk to the class about their child to help them understand and not be scared.

There are also more formal approaches. Many grade schools have developed or adopted programs for their students and staff. These are sometimes done as a regular part of every students’ curriculum or they may be specifically timed (and designed) for a classroom in which a child with a disability has been or is about to be included. At least anecdotally, these programs have been found to increase the number and depth of relationships that form in the classroom (and beyond) between the students with and without disabilities. Some examples are:

- **Volunteers read selected, age-appropriate books about people with specific disabilities** to the students as an introduction to discussion and learning.
- **Volunteers with disabilities come into the classroom** and talk about what it is like to grow up with that disability.
- A show is performed utilizing **puppets**.

Many human service agencies, as well as colleges, teaching human service-related courses have trainings in which staff/students use **adaptive equipment or devices that simulate specific disabilities** in order to be sensitized to some of the issues facing people with disabilities. There are several different approaches that are aimed at actively linking people with disabilities with others. Local Arcs, DDS area Family Support Centers and others can help people locate these opportunities.

Many people with significant disabilities cannot master social skills. Several agencies, parents’ groups and schools have established and utilized the resources cited below to help them have friends now.

- Recreational and social programs that provide **people with disabilities the opportunity to get together with other like-age people with disabilities**. This is usually around specific activities

such as dances, cookouts, bowling, trips, etc. Often these gatherings are limited to people with a specific disability, or only people served by a specific organization. Real friendships do come from this approach, although participants are often grouped with others with disabilities for most of their day, in segregated classes, group homes, day habs, sheltered workshops, etc.

- Trying to be sure that **people with disabilities spend at least part of their day in close proximity to like-age people without disabilities.** “Proximity”—sharing physical space with others—is clearly an important element of relationship building. Friendships cannot develop without the contact that closeness provides. But proximity, in and of itself, is not usually enough to guarantee that a relationship will develop; there needs to be positive interaction, too. There are many lonely people, both with and without disabilities, who live in the midst of their “community”, who work at “real” jobs in local businesses, and who are members (at least in name) of local groups.
- A **cross-generational/“mentoring”** approach to relationship building. In some cases, a young person with a disability may be matched with an adult who has dealt successfully in his/her life with a similar disability (they may also share some common interests!). This can be a very valuable way for young person to learn to better cope with their own disability. Another approach will match young people with disabilities to older mentors based primarily on interests. Most of these matches are between young people with disabilities and adults without disabilities. These “cross-generational” matches sometimes result in lifelong relationships and friendships.
- There are a growing number of initiatives that purposely seek to **support relationships between like-aged people with and without disabilities.** Some are established solely to help people served by a specific organization. Some are available to anyone in specific geographic areas. This approach may require the most effort to be successful but has resulted in deep and lasting relationships.

Extending ourselves to care for and about others creates and sustains empathy in our society. Like a friendship between a person with disabilities and a person who does not have disabilities, the benefits will have a snowball effect: enriching the lives of each of the friends, their respective families, and overall, making their surrounding community a much finer place to live.

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