Friends, Leisure, and Quality of Life for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

Everyone, including individuals with developmental disabilities, need friends that they can talk to and with whom they can have fun. Spending time with friends and in leisure activities can help people to relax and feel good about themselves, promote their mental health and improve their quality of life. As a direct support professional, you can help individuals to become active in their communities as a way to make friends and have fun!

Why are friends and leisure important for mental health and quality of life?
For individuals with developmental disabilities, having friends and close relationships with family members is one of the best ways to maintain and build positive mental health. Friends can promote mental health by:

- **Alleviating stress** –
  - Friends can listen to and comfort individuals when they want to share their problems.
  - Doing fun things with friends can help individuals to shift their attention away from problems, and just relax and have fun.

- **Increasing a person’s self confidence and feelings of value** –
  - Having friends can make an individual feel loved and important.
  - Feeling valued by other people can increase an individual’s self confidence and self esteem – this contributes to good mental health.

- **Decreasing feelings of loneliness and isolation** –
  - Friends can be fun! Individuals can call on their friends when they want to participate in an activity or just talk about what is going on in their lives.
  - Friends can help remind individuals with developmental disabilities that other people share similar feelings and experiences when they face challenges in life, and that, because everyone faces challenges, they are not alone.

Making sure that individuals with developmental disabilities have choices about the friends they want to see and activities they want to participate in can empower them to feel more control over their lives – this also contributes to positive mental health. In this publication from the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) Consumer Advisory Committee (CAC) (http://www.dds.ca.gov/cac/pdf/CAC_ConversationswDD.pdf) individuals with developmental disabilities say that they want to:

- Choose my own friends
- Do what I want on weekends
- Decide how to spend my own free time

Why are friendships especially important for individuals with developmental disabilities?
Many of the people in the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities are paid to provide support. While friendships between individuals and staff may be very meaningful, the fact remains that you and others are paid to spend time with the person. Having friends is critical to everyone’s quality of life. Having a balance between the number of people who are paid to be in
a person’s life and the number of people who are friends “just because” adds to that quality of life.

**What can I do to assist individuals in making friends?**

As a direct support professional, it may be part of your job is to assist the people you support to make and keep friends! One of the best ways for individuals to make new friends is to get out into their community and meet people. You can assist them by first finding out what sorts of activities they are interested in. Steps you can take next include:

- Identifying local newspapers, magazines, or websites that contain information about recreational and special events, and looking through these resources regularly to find activities that would interest those you support
- Finding out about classes and activities offered through your city’s Parks and Recreation Department, the local Community College, Adult Education, and Regional Occupational Centers and Programs (ROCP)
- Contacting people at groups such as the YMCA, Special Olympics, and People First California to see if they run activities that those you support would enjoy (see the links at the end of this article for more organizations that may offer recreational activities for the individuals you support)
- Contacting your local Regional Center to learn whether they can connect you and the people you support to community activities

For instance, if an individual lets you know that he or she is interested in gardening, you can find out whether your local community college or YMCA runs a community garden, if a local nursery offers classes about gardening, or even if a nearby neighbor who loves to garden would be willing to invite the individual to spend time in the garden one or two days a month.

You can be creative as you look for community activities for the people you support. Fun activities for individuals can include:

- Joining a sports team – such as joining a soccer, baseball, or swim team
- Participating in a fitness activity – such as joining an aerobics or karate class or finding friends to run, walk, or lift weights with
- Taking a class – local community colleges and city Park and Recreation Departments often offer programs such as cooking classes, art classes, photography classes, and dance classes
- Joining a support group – such as a support group for people with cerebral palsy or mental retardation
- Volunteering – some individuals may enjoy volunteering at a hospital, school, or soup kitchen – this can be a good way to make a contribution to the community, have fun, and make friends all at the same time
- Forming a group – activities do not have to be organized by others; individuals can build stronger relationships with friends they already have (for instance from work, school, or church) by forming their own groups – this could include starting a TV club where everybody gets together once a week to watch TV shows, or starting a movie or book club as a way for friends to get together and have fun
Some of these activities are good for more than just having fun and making friends – by joining a sports team or participating in a fitness activity, individuals are keeping their bodies healthy as well as their minds!

**What are the risks in making friends and participating in community activities?**

Although making new friends and participating in community activities can be fun and meaningful for individuals with developmental disabilities, there are also some risks that you and the people you support should be aware of.

Some people may need assistance with transportation to attend events in their communities. You can assist them by helping them learn about bus schedules or arranging for private transportation to and from their activity. Work with the individual to plan exactly how they will safely get to and home from their activity.

Remember that some of the individuals you support may not be used to making new friends or trying new activities. Meeting new people can be scary for all of us, and those with developmental disabilities may feel especially uncertain and fearful that others may not want to be their friends. As a direct support professional, you can help by sitting down with the individuals and talking about their strengths and the positive things they would bring to a friendship. For example:

- What are their interests?
- Do they have a good sense of humor? Do they laugh at other people’s jokes?
- What other things do they have to share?

One risk in making new friends is that the individual may become involved with people who do not treat them well. To deal with this risk, you can teach individuals about the differences between good friends and bad friends. If you see that an individual is getting involved with groups that are encouraging them to participate in unhealthy or illegal behavior, or with people who are simply not very nice, you can talk to the person you support about this and, if needed, bring up the issue with the service coordinator or, encourage the individual to seek support from family members as well. Let individuals know that they may want to stop being friends with a person who:

- Does all the talking and never listens
- Puts them down or makes fun of them
- Lies or is dishonest
- Always wants to know where they are and who they are with
- Asks questions or does things that make them feel uncomfortable
- Asks for risky favors, such as to borrow important personal items or money
- Engages in illegal or unsafe behavior

Remind individuals that if the things another person says to them or does to them make them feel angry, sad, or uncomfortable, he or she is not a friend. It is always a choice whether or not to be friends with another person!
Some family members and direct support professionals are so concerned that people in the community will make fun of the individual or take advantage of him or her that they do not want the individual to participate in community activities. While it is good to be aware of these concerns, they should not stop you from helping the people you support to make friends and become active members of their communities. Many people discover that once the individual finds that right activity that he or she enjoys and can share with others, the activity becomes the natural basis for forming meaningful friendships.

Remember, when individuals who you are active in the community there could be risk that they will become a victim of crime. You can use this DDS Safety Net Presentation to teach people about how to stay safe when they are being active: http://www.ddssafety.net/DisplayArticle.aspx?StoryID=246.

**How can I talk to the individuals I support about friendships and leisure activities?**

In addition to the suggestions in this article, this month’s DDS Safety Net Presentations are great resources for you to use when you talk to the individuals you support:
- This month’s Feature Presentation on “Living in Your Community”
- This month’s Safety Point Presentation on “Internet Safety”
- This month’s Health Point Presentation on “Finding Healthy Activities in Your Community”

In addition, this website from the National Mental Health Information Center can be a good resource for both you and the individuals you support: http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA-3716/default.asp. It has sections on making friends, keeping friends, and resolving problems in relationships.

Finally, this workbook, *Making My Own Choices*, can be a good tool to assist the individuals you support to think about and make choices about fun things they want to do and friends they want to make:

**Leisure and Recreation Organizations**

Check out these organizations for more information on activities in the community that the people you support may want to participate in. Also, be sure the check with your local Regional Center for more local activities!
- Special Olympics Northern California – www.sone.org
- Special Olympics Southern California – www.sosc.org
- Best Buddies California – www.bestbuddiescalifornia.org
- People First California – www.peopelfirstca.org
- The Life Steps Foundation – www.lifestepsfoundation.org
• The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability –
  http://www.n cpad.org/organizations/index.php?country=&state=California
• The Arc of California – www.arccalifornia.org
• California Adult School Education Provider Directory –
  www.otan.us/CAAEPproviders/index.cfm
• California Regional Occupational Program (ROP) – www.carocp.org/carocps.html