

# Understanding friendship stability in adolescents with intellectual and developmental disability

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## 01. Background

Adolescent friendships enhance quality of life, and can be arguably all the more crucial for neurodivergent individuals such as those diagnosed with Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD) who often report struggling with social exclusion and loneliness (Athamanah et al., 2019; McClausland et al., 2020; Sigstad, 2016). Close friendships within this population can combat said barriers by increasing feelings of happiness (Fulford & Cobigo, 2016), self-confidence (Lafferty et al., 2013), and community engagement (Athamanah et al., 2019), yet not much is known about the qualities that define these friendships or make them long-lasting (Josol et al., 2022). Notably, no research to date has examined the factors that contribute to friendship stability across individuals with intellectual and developmental disability- a concerning point when considering that only half of older adults with IDD have someone in their life that they would consider a best friend (McClausland et al., 2020). Given that individuals with IDD often have restricted social networks outside of school and therefore fewer opportunities for friendship development (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017), it is imperative to understand the factors that lead to long-lasting friendships.

### Related literature

Social skills and problem behaviours (such as internalizing, externalizing, aggression, and hyperactivity) at the intrapersonal level of the adolescent are thought to influence the quality and stability of their friendships (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Bowker et al., 2006; Flannery & Smith, 2017; Hartl et al., 2015; Marengo et al., 2018; Poulin & Chan, 2010); interpersonal factors such as the dyad's level of similarity, supportiveness, and intimacy are thought to do the same (Blieszner & Ogletree, 2017; Kiesner et al., 2004; Poulin & Chan, 2010; Hartl et al. 2015).

Friendships of adolescents with IDD may be characterized differently than friendships of typically developing adolescents (Sigstad, 2016; Tipton et al., 2013). In the literature pertaining to typically developing teens, friendships were described as involving "attributes of support, intimacy, affection, trust, ability to manage conflict, and time" (Roach, 2016, p. 330). However, when adolescents with IDD were asked to define friendships, they were less likely to discuss themes of intimacy / disclosure, support, and trust (Matheson et al., 2007).

It can be hypothesized that the values that would typically constitute high-quality friendships (when rated on variables such as security, closeness, support) do not hold as much weight for these adolescents, as they are not the qualities that define friendships for this population.

## 02. Research Questions

- What are the perspectives and definitions of friendship according to this population?
- Do social skill and/or friendship quality influence the likelihood that a friendship will last?

## 03. Methodology

Nine participants between the ages of 13 and 16 years old participated in the current project. They all were diagnosed with IDD and attended the same adapted secondary school. They participated in two testing sessions approximately 32 days apart, where they completed:

- Semi-structured interviews**
  - Friendship nominations at both time points assessed stability
  - Characterizations and definitions of friendship were transcribed and analyzed
- Social Skills Intervention Scale (SSIS)**
  - To yield scores for individual social skills
- Close Person's Questionnaire (CPQ)**
  - To assess dyad's friendship quality

## 05. Results: Can friendship stability be predicted by social skills or friendship quality?

Of eight friendships, only two remained stable, and this did not seem to be mediated by interpersonal friendship quality or intrapersonal social skills.

- P3, who maintained the same friend, had average scores for social skills and friendship supportiveness, while P5, who also maintained a stable friendship, had high social skills but low friendship quality.

### Some possible maintenance factors:

- Distance vs. proximity (n = 9; all school or classmates)
- Out of school contact (n = 5 dyads communicate outside)
- Role of parents (n = 3 noted reliance on parents)

### Relational similarity:

- Mostly same-gendered friendships (n = 6)
- Most reported they were "similar" to their friend (n = 6)

### SIMILARITIES BETWEEN P3 & P5

*The perceived importance of shared interests, the role of communication, and the influence of external factors*



## 06. Discussion

Understanding the factors that contribute to friendship stability helps dispel misconceptions that individuals with IDD are unable to form lasting relationships. It highlights their capacity for enduring friendships, which is crucial for promoting their social inclusion and well-being.

Further, from this project we learn that shared interests and effective communication may play a significant role in maintaining friendships. These findings can inform the development of targeted interventions and programs that promote friendship stability among adolescents with IDD. For example, programs that encourage shared activities, improve communication skills, and involve family support can be designed based on these insights.

## 04. Results: How do teens with IDD understand friendship?

Results suggest that adolescents with IDD understand friendship as a multidimensional, highly valued relationship, characterized by mutual respect, support, and reciprocal interactions. Most common themes:

### Friendship Definitions



#### Friendships are important & valuable (n = 9)

"It means a lot to be friends." "[Without my friends] I would be lonely, left alone...."



#### Friendship means knowing someone (n = 6)

"Best friends knows us a lot. Knows, like, questions, knows a bit about ourselves"



#### Friendship means being nice (n = 5)

"Friendship means to me as like, being like kind, being kind and caring."

**Also noted:** Friendship means being helpful (n = 4), A friend is someone you hang out with (n = 2)

### Friendship Qualities



#### Friends should be kind & helpful (n = 9)

Interviewer: How do you know when someone is your friend?

"They [friends] are really sweet and friendly with you."



#### Friends should bring joy & fun (n = 6)

Interviewer: What makes him a good friend?

"Um, um, the way he makes me like, he makes funny sounds and that kind of makes me laugh."

**Also noted:** Friends should be trustworthy (n = 3), friends should provide company (n = 3), friends should check in on each other (n = 3)



### References

