

# Fostering Friendships

**At once heavily sought after and frustratingly elusive, friendships are nonetheless vital for a full and meaningful life. Here we discuss some useful pointers to keep in mind.**

We have talked elsewhere about the [vulnerability](#) associated with building relationships and paradoxically the importance of freely given relationships as a safeguard in the life of a person with a disability. As well as this safeguarding function, friendships serve more fundamental life needs, such as:

- to love and be loved
- to experience intimacy
- to have a sense of belonging
- being able to contribute
- to learn and develop

What needs to be said from the outset though is that friendships cannot be manufactured or forced. But what we can do is construct fertile

environments within which friendships are more likely to blossom.

Traditionally, people with disability lived largely segregated lives and associated mainly with other people with disability and the people paid to support them. Occasionally friendships were forged within these groups but it was quite hit and miss given people were grouped based on their disability alone and rarely did these friendships grow beyond the context of the day centre, sheltered workshop, etc.

This is illustrative of the fact that human services cannot meet this fundamental need. We need to look beyond services and turn to community. And given this segregated and professionalised life path typical of people with disability, especially intellectual disability, it is little wonder that people generally are tentative and unsure about getting to know someone with a disability. So the first thing that needs to happen is creating genuine opportunities for people just to spend time together, to get to know them.

Although it is a prerequisite, it is not enough to set up such opportunities and hope for the best. There are some deliberate strategies that you can employ to enhance the chances of friendships growing.



## Life affirming assumptions

Sometimes it can be difficult to picture someone with significant impairments in genuine friendship with another person and sometimes we may even question their desire for such friendship. Again, this is an easy trap to fall into, given all the signals and imagery generated by a life dominated by professional human services. Seeing is not always believing. Instead, hold steadfast to the belief that friendship and human connection is an innate desire of all human beings, and that there are people out there who are interested in meeting a person with disability and sharing time with them.

## Interpersonal Identification

It is important to build grounds for people to see likeness and similarity rather than difference. Interpersonal identification is where I see something of myself in you and you see something of yourself in me. By its very nature it therefore happens beyond but inclusive of that part of a person's identity which is their disability. Everyone has a special attribute that is going to help facilitate a meaningful connection.



w: [www.incharge.net.au](http://www.incharge.net.au)  
e: [hello@incharge.net.au](mailto:hello@incharge.net.au)

## Valued roles

When people occupy a valued role it is one of the most powerful ways community members are likely to see similarity over difference. One of the most common ways all of us relate to each other is through the roles we have. Facilitating valued roles is a powerful way of assisting people move into the circles of ordinary community life and into contact with others in ways and settings that are typical. Focussing on valued roles is very different to focussing on activities, hours and programs.

## Asking

This is probably the hardest aspect of building friendships because you are at your most vulnerable and the fear of rejection is very real. But to create opportunities for connection, you need to make the ask. It is crucial to frame it in such a way so as not to turn people off. Asking, "do you accept people with disabilities" or "will you be so-and-so's friend" do not work. Your ask must be something do-able, something imaginable by the person you are asking. It has to be around a role.

**We can work with you on setting up roles for success.**

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