

The #1 Need

From the www.disabilityisnatural.com E-Newsletter by Kathie Snow

Great energy is devoted to determine what a person with a disability needs. Assessments are done, tests are given, observations are made, and more. Then more energy (along with many dollars) is spent trying to *meet* these needs.

For children with disabilities, professionals and/or family members may focus on the perceived need for therapies or services which attempt to get a child to walk, talk, behave appropriately, make eye contact, master the pincer grasp, read at grade level, and much more. For adults with disabilities, the focus may continue to be on some of these same things (especially behavior!), as well as habilitation, job skills, transportation, and more.

Based on almost 20 years of experience, it seems the #1 need of the vast majority of children and adults with disabilities—regardless of the type of disability, the age of the person, or anything else—is seldom identified by professionals or family members. What is this #1 need? Friends.

A friend doesn't care if you have the "functional skills" that are valued by so many. One friend can lead to other friends. A friend can be the gateway to meeting other real needs of a person: employment, transportation, joining a club, enjoying new experiences, and so much more.

We often worry about the social skills of a person with a disability. Aren't friends the best way to improve in that area? All of us want and need to be successful in our own peer groups. Children and adults with disabilities are routinely expected to "achieve" in order to be successful in the eyes of professionals and/or family members. But isn't success in one's own peer group a far greater achievement? And how many of us have recognized that a person's behavior is much different (and better) in other environments? In

addition, have we ever questioned whether a person's so-called inappropriate behavior might be the *result* of the person not having friends or social opportunities outside of "special" (segregated) environments?

There are many benefits to having at least one good friend. My son, Benjamin, who has cerebral palsy, received pediatric therapies for the first six years of his life, much of it devoted to getting him to crawl "normally;" he never performed this feat for therapists. He resigned his therapy career at age six. Several months later, he crawled across the gym floor at school. Why? Because his *friends* were doing it in a PE game! Think of the benefits of friendship in your own life. What if you had no one to share your secrets with, vent to, joke with, and so much more? Now, try to imagine if the only people in your life are those who are *paid to be around you*. To me, it is unimaginable.

Can any system—special ed, adult services, etc.—meet this real need? No. There are no rules and regs about friendship, and no way to write goals for same. Nevertheless, we can all take steps to generate positive change.

Friendships are made based on shared interests. When we make the effort to identify a person's interests, and connect the person to others who share those interests, we've opened the door to new opportunities and potential friendships.

In all of our efforts to meet the needs of children and adults with disabilities, we must reconsider what's really important. Which is more important? Achieving this skill or that, or having a friend who wants to be with you, just the way you are? And shouldn't children and adults with disabilities also enjoy the life-changing joys and rewards of *being* a friend to someone else who needs a friend?

**Good friends are good
for your health.**

Irwin Sarason

**A friend is one who knows
us, but loves us anyway.**

Fr. Jerome Cummings

**The only way to have
a friend is to be one.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson