

Supporting Friendship for Older People with Learning Disabilities

SUMMARY

Friendships and leading an active life are issues that are important to health and emotional well-being. People with learning disabilities often have few friends, either with or without learning disabilities, while growing older brings additional challenges in maintaining friendships and participating in shared activities. The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities' Growing Older with Learning Disabilities (GOLD) programme asked people with learning disabilities about their friendships, their aspirations and how they spend their time. It also funded two service development projects, which aimed to provide leisure opportunities to older people with learning disabilities and to facilitate friendships with people without learning disabilities. The value for people with learning disabilities being more familiar and accepted in their local communities should not be underestimated. Ongoing support in the long term was essential to the success of these projects.

BACKGROUND

As people grow older, their quality of life is often largely determined by whether they are able to enjoy an active and fulfilling lifestyle and have a network of family and friends around them. People with learning disabilities often have very restricted social networks (Emerson et al., 2001) and friendships and social activities may be closely linked. With the closure of long-stay hospitals it was hoped that there would be greater opportunity for friendships to develop in the community (Jahoda et al., 1990). However research has shown that although contact and interaction has increased as a result of this transition, only rarely have friendships developed with people without learning disabilities (Bratt & Johnston, 1988).

For people with learning disabilities, services such as day centres frequently act as their main source of social contact outside of the home. As set out in policy reviews *Valuing People* (Department of Health, 2001), *The Same as You?* (Scottish Executive, 2000) and the Welsh review of learning disability services (National Assembly for Wales, 2001), day services need to modernise and expand, while recent attention has focused on developing positive alternatives (for example, McIntosh & Whittaker, 1998).

THE RESEARCH

- East Lothian Care and Accommodation Project (ELCAP) provides supported accommodation for people with learning disabilities, including older people, who have moved out from institutions. ELCAP sought to match the individual interests of a group of older people with learning disabilities with existing activities in the community, and established some new and inclusive activities for people with and without learning disabilities.
- Enable, Scotland, set up and ran an integrated Community Allotment Club for people with and without learning disabilities, which offered a leisure activity and an environment conducive to the development of new relationships.
- Wandsworth Rathbone's Looking Forward project interviewed people with moderate learning disabilities living with family carers over 50. They were asked about their current lives and hopes and plans for the future, including friendships and daytime and social/leisure activities.
- An in-house GOLD project carried out a survey, asking what was good and what was difficult about growing older.
- The GOLD Over 50 Saturday Group acted as a reference group for the programme but those who were involved also valued the opportunity to make new friends and share social activities outside of the meetings.

THE FINDINGS

Existing friendships are inevitably affected by changes as people grow older: friends move away, retirement may mean loss of contact with friends at work, there may be fewer opportunities to make new friends, and, of course, older people begin to face the death of friends. People growing older with learning disabilities may also have to contend with reduced support in attending social activities as family carers grow older, and the death of a family carer brings the likely loss of contact with a social network previously shared with them.

Insufficient resources may prevent friendships outside the service setting from being supported and the redevelopment or closure of services can mean that previous users become geographically dispersed and lose contact with friends. Moving to a more individual residential service can be beneficial but people living on their own may become isolated and lonely unless they are supported to maintain previous social networks.

The GOLD programme learned of some older people with learning disabilities who lead full and active lives and thus benefit from security and affection, share ideas and gain practical help and a support network during difficult times. However Wandsworth Rathbone's Looking Forward survey found that many people with learning disabilities were acutely aware of their lack of friends and limited social networks. Parents questioned in the survey attributed their son or daughter's difficulty in building and maintaining friendships to a lack of skills and self-confidence and would have welcomed help in these areas.

Supporting the development of relationships with members of the wider community is a complex task. ELCAP found it difficult to recruit 'introducers' from the local community to facilitate the inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities in activities. Support staff were instead required to take this role which was very challenging, particularly if they were of a different generation to the group members or had very different interests. Indoor bowls and tea dances did prove successful and the older people with learning disabilities were beginning to form friendships with other attendees and become known in the community.

It also took time to establish Enable's integrated allotment club. Finding men without learning disabilities to share the allotments proved more difficult than anticipated. Now one of the two allotments in particular is flourishing and many small but significant informal opportunities for socialising and support have arisen between the club members and other allotment users.

After attending the GOLD Over 50 Saturday Group for a year, when members were asked what they liked about the project, they particularly welcomed the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. Supported visits to each other's homes and social activities were included and it became clear that resources needed to be provided to ensure these activities continued after the end of the project.

IMPLICATIONS

- As people grow older it is important to value and protect their friendships and social activities.
- Opportunities need to be created for people to try new activities and make new friends.
- Support services need to be able to take account of people's changing and age-related needs.
- The inclusion of people with learning disabilities in their communities takes considerable time. It cannot be forced, but the rewards can be considerable.
- Services need to be willing to devote resources to this kind of work, knowing the outcomes may be both slow and unpredictable and sometimes aspects will not work. Not trying will leave many older people with learning disabilities isolated in their 'communities'.

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