

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Like Ability: 10 Basic Skills That Promote Relationships

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“How do I get a friend?”

“Can you get me a friend?”

“I’m lonely.”

These kinds of concerns are raised routinely by people with intellectual disabilities. They know they are lonely. They know the solution is to make friends. But they have difficulty establishing any kind of ongoing supportive friendship as they seem to fall apart so quickly and easily. Staff are often confused saying, “But he’s such a nice guy,” or “She is so much fun to hang out with, I don’t know why she doesn’t have friends.”

The sad truth is that because we work with people so closely, we get to know them well. We can see the real them that, to others, may be hidden behind problem behaviours, poor social skills and inappropriate boundaries. In fact we can get to know them so well that we stop really noticing that their behaviour, their social skills and their boundaries are significant barriers to social relationship for them. No one is going to like them just because you do. In fact no one will spend time, without pay, with the person you support unless they have a certain set of skills that make them desirable to be with. Expecting ‘friendships’ to be gifts out of ‘pity’ and ‘sacrifice’ starts people with disabilities down a long and lonely road. Likability is a skill! A teachable skill. And let’s be clear, these rules are NOT ‘rules for the disabled and not the rest of us.’ In fact we all need to learn these – the difference is we all had social opportunities to learn that were often denied to people with disabilities.

Relationships require a lot of skills. Here are ten that can be taught – from these skills wonderful friends, loving wives and thoughtful husbands grow.

Reciprocity

This is the single most important skill for the maintenance of human relationships. Giving to and getting from indicates a relationship of equals. Teaching or encouraging someone you work with to give of self is hugely important. Sometimes disability puts someone in the place of being constant receivers of time and attention. This can create an addiction to being the center of attention. People with disabilities need to be in places where they gift time and attention to others.



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A Note from Crystal:

Several years ago I stumbled across the art of baking and its many positives. Many people can agree that baking is an art. It requires skill, practice and lots of taste testing (everybody loves the taste test). Baking brings me several things: pride in a job well done, positive feelings of giving and sharing and social reinforcement in the form of "Oh, this is so good," or "Can you give me this recipe?" Baking makes me feel good. It boosts my self-esteem, it helps me to build social relationships, and it fills my life with tastiness. Best of all, baking has given me something to share with my family. My niece's favourite thing to do when she comes over is to pull out a recipe, put on an apron, and bake up a batch of cookies or cupcakes.

As an example, from a real conversation, a man with an intellectual disability tells a visitor to his program, "I'm going home for Christmas!" The visitor asked, "Oh, when are you going home?" The fellow said, "I'm going home on the 21st." The visitor said, "Oh, that's great. You know that's my birthday." The fellow paused and said, "Aren't you excited for me, I'm going home." The fellow paused and noted the information about the birthday and then shoved it aside concluding that the conversation needed to be only about him. This is the kind of egocentricity that gets in the way of friendships and relationship.

Some Hints:

- Consider volunteer work, somewhere where the individual learns the value of listening and giving attention to someone or something else.
- When the person goes for a visit with family or friends, encourage him/her to make something or get something to take to contribute.

Trust:

Thought to be an emotion, trust is actually a skill. It's an important abuse prevention skill. Knowing who to trust and how to trust keeps people safe in relationships. Too often people with disabilities are encouraged to trust everyone indiscriminately. Learning that there are those who manipulate and 'pretend friendship for personal gain' is important.

An example from a real interaction: a woman with Down syndrome hugs everyone who comes into her group home. She has decided that if a person works with her, if a person comes through the door, he/she is safe. When she moved to S.I.L. (Semi-Independent Living), she hugged a repair man who was there to fix a burner on her stove. That hug, which she initiated, was used as evidence of consent in court after she reported being raped.

Some Hints:

- Learning about boundaries is learning about trust. Ensure that you teach and practice boundaries.
- Slow down new relationships with new staff, have new staff earn trust.
- Practice good boundaries with those you work with.
- Use teachable moments when they happen.

Thoughtfulness:

At the core of good relationships is the ability to listen, to take in information and then act in a manner that demonstrates caring. People with disabilities, like all of us, can be naturally thoughtful. Remembering that you like blue flowers and pointing them out when you go by – this simple act may not be noticed by a direct support professional as

A Note from Kim:

One thing that my friends have always said is true about me, the thing that makes me stand out, is the time I take to reach out. Maintaining friendships is important and it takes work. Friendships require give and take. But who gives first? Being a good friend means you are always willing to be the one to start the reciprocal cycle. It means being the first one to call or text when you haven't talked to someone in awhile. It means remembering your friend's birthday, their likes and dislikes. Taking that time to reach out is what has helped me to make and keep friends for life.

anything special but it's really a wonderful moment that needs to be commented on. This simple act may not be noticed by a direct support professional as anything special but it's really a wonderful moment that needs to be commented on.

Some Hints:

- Help the individual make a 'birthday and celebration calendar' so they can plan to get cards or small gifts for the important people in their lives.
- Instead of just signing a card, encourage or help the individual with writing a personal note.
- Demonstrate the power of 'thank you' when getting a gift, have a drawer full of 'thank you cards' available for people to use.

Approachability:

Simply put, don't stink. Good hygiene and attention to grooming are far more important than you might think. Some people with disabilities need a lot of praise and attention for looking and smelling good. Some staff believe that this is a behaviour that reinforces itself but it's not. Remember that people with disabilities are not very good incidental learners so they may not pick up smiles of approval or notice social reinforcement. So tell them. "You look and smell great," or "Wow, you are going to turn heads tonight!"

A real mistake made by well-meaning people happened when a young woman really wanted to dance with a fellow at the Halloween dance. She worked up the courage to ask him to dance. He said, "I don't want to dance with you because you always smell bad." When she was really upset, the staff calmed her down by saying that he was 'mean' – they never mention that he was right; she hated showering and changing clothes and often did smell. It was an opportunity lost.

Some Hints:

- Have fun shopping for soaps and shampoos that have a nice scent. There are so many great scents to choose from. Involving the person in the choices about what they use may give encouragement.
- Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce. Or for those who don't like technical terms: Praise, praise, praise. It's more powerful than you can imagine. When hygiene is done well give a bit of praise or reinforcement – don't center the person out in front of others, just a private, quiet word of praise can work wonders.

A Note from Dave:

When I started giving lectures, I must have lost a bit of perspective. One day at home Joe said to me, "I am not your audience, you are not my instructor." I guess I'd been using my lecture voice and he didn't like it. I apologized and I made sure he knew I meant it by the fact that I never did that again. Apology means change.

Interests and Passions:

Small talk comes from big interests. Having something to say is important, being involved in something gives interesting things to say. Notice what the person you are supporting is naturally interested in and encourage hobbies and pastimes. This will develop an interest that can sometimes be sustained through a lifetime. It also can develop into 'interest specific' friends and naturally occurring groups. More than that, people who do things that they are interested in are naturally more interesting to talk to than those who don't. It also can give them an activity to 'share time' with when they are alone.

Some Hints:

- If the person you support has a natural talent or interest, see if there are community groups who share that interest. If he/she knits, are there local knitting circles? If he/she is interested in art, is there a local gallery with activities and social events?
- If the person likes to spend time alone, maybe he/she would like to learn to do word search puzzles or Sudoku.
- If the individual has an interest and leadership qualities, maybe he/she would like to start a group get together. This can help both self esteem and develop connections at the same time.

Responsibility:

Apology is tough, but taking responsibility for things that go wrong is an important relationship skill. The tendency to blame others or to blame disability is a way to shift responsibility from self to some 'other.' Saying, "I'm sorry" for hurt or disappointment is powerful. But the only real apology is change. Apologizing and doing the same thing over and over again makes apology meaningless.

Some Hints:

- Model apology! Saying you are sorry doesn't make you weak, it doesn't take away your authority, it doesn't make you look foolish. In fact, an apology can only enhance your character and demonstrate your willingness to take responsibility.
- When someone with a disability has a friendship that is breaking down because of something he/she has done, talk to the person about the power of apology.
- Role play it together. Use self disclosure regarding when an apology saved a friendship or relationship of your own – do not use stories that give too much intimate information.

Assertion:

Don't be a doormat! Assertion is involved in decision making, in negotiation, even in sharing. Stating a preference means being able to put forth what you want. This skill is only learned in an atmosphere of safety. Teasing for stating preferences can be devastating when the person you are supporting is developing the skill of speaking up. When a person is asked what he/she wants to watch on television, and then gets a negative response like, "Oh no, really, you want to watch that kind of 'baby' crap," he/she is much less likely to contribute in the future. This can lead to a life of passivity and isolation.

Some Hints:

- Encourage 'voice.' This means that you can assist the person to speak up and speak out for him/herself over things that are small but important. Choosing a leisure activity, choosing what he/she wants for lunch, choosing what to do in their day ... all these are things that can be done daily and can demonstrate the power of 'voice' and 'choice.'
- Remember, if you asked, it's a choice!
- Remember, if you asked, you have to be willing to listen.
- Remember, if you asked, you have to follow through.

Negotiation:

Any husband or wife in the world can attest to the fact that negotiation is a complex art. Friendships are destroyed when negotiation isn't used. The ability to listen and work through decisions means a willingness to be flexible. 'It's my way or the highway,' may be a cute slogan but it makes for a lousy trait in a friend. It's important to have opportunities to practice negotiation. Sometimes winning, sometimes giving in, sometimes deciding on something else entirely – these outcomes can be exciting rather than distressing.

Some Hints:

- Use teachable moments to set up times for negotiation. By the way, negotiation means that sometimes you, as a staff, do not win. We've seen people use what they call negotiation in a way that makes the word 'intimidation' more accurate.
- Make negotiations fun, if possible, it doesn't have to be all serious and you can both joke around while you are talking.
- See if there are win/win results available that both are good with.
- Highlight that by negotiating with the individual you are both doing what adults do best when they are at their best – communicating, listening and problem solving.

Sharing:

So many people with disabilities learn early that the lion's share of attention belongs to them. Since they take longer to learn, they are more often the focus of parental attention than their brothers or sisters. Then they are the subject of meetings at school where the focus is on just them. It continues when they grow into adults and are the subject of meetings and individualized planning. They can develop an odd kind of egocentricity. 'If it ain't about me, it ain't worth talking about.' Learning to share attention is one of the most important, and most difficult, things we all learn.

Some Hints:

- Again, teachable moments are the best way to approach learning. When someone wants to speak to you, and you are speaking with another, don't just break away and switch your attention to the individual, have him/her wait, even if it's just a few seconds at first – you can increase the amount of wait time later.
- Demonstrate sharing between staff. Let people see how it works. It's a nice way to be and a nice way to live. Let them see that.

Manners:

Sadly, manners are no longer quite fashionable. Even so, 'please' and 'thank you' are still 'magic words.' Knowing how to meet and greet, knowing how to shake hands, and chew with a closed mouth are hugely important skills. There are lots of phrases that hint at manners like 'gimme gimme never gets,' and 'take a picture instead of staring why don't you?' There is a certain degree of civility that makes it easier to like someone.

Some Hints:

- Remember, you are a powerful model in the lives of the people you serve. Use 'please' and 'thank you.' Demonstrate good manners and graceful interactions.
- It's hard to teach this without making it sound childish, but that's because this is such a focus for parents of little children – even so don't slip into age inappropriate language or tone of voice when teaching or modelling.
- Point out when people respond positively to manners, "The waiter really liked that you said, 'please,' did you see him smile and nod when you asked like that?"

We'll throw one more in just for fun ...

Humour:

Everyone finds humour attractive. Spend time laughing! No Hints Necessary!

Summary:

Knowing that 'likability' is a skill that can be learned is powerfully good news for those who support people with disabilities. It means that they think of and notice relationship skills, simple ones like the ten listed here. Noticing these skills can lead to reinforcement and training. These skills are fun to teach because they focus on the natural parts of both living and loving.

Note: This article has been adapted and expanded from an original article in Exceptional Family Magazine. This article was developed for those who work with adults as the original was for parents of young children.

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