

# Chapter 8

## Friendships: The Power of Positive Alliance

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### 8.1 Introduction

As Diener and Diener (2009) comment, positive psychology has had a focus on adulthood and only relatively recently has turned its attention to child development. They acknowledge past research which now makes a valuable contribution to positive psychology concepts. In this chapter on friendships, I will draw on relevant research from child and adolescent development.

Friendships serve a range of important purposes. Mendelson and Aboud (1999) have categorised these as: companionship, intimacy, support, reliable alliance, self-validation and emotional security. There are long-term consequences for children who do not establish friendships and positive peer relations. Several longitudinal studies have found that children with poor peer relations and lack of friends go on to experience maladjustment in terms of life status, perceived competence and mental health difficulties in adulthood (e.g. Cowen et al. 1973; Bagwell et al. 1998). There is evidence to indicate that having friends is associated with good academic performance and school adjustment, and correspondingly not having friends predicts poor academic performance and school adjustment (e.g. Ladd 1990; Wentzel et al. 2004). School adjustment is usefully defined by Ladd and Kochenderfer (1996): ‘the degree to which children become interested, engaged, comfortable and successful in the school environment’ (p. 324).

Providing individual support for the child who lacks friends and is rejected by classmates is not enough in itself. There is a need not only to help them to develop new skills but also to address the perceptions and behaviours of others in the class (Frederickson 1991).

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The qualities of friendship for young children differ in some respects from qualities of adult friendships. It should be acknowledged that children of school age are entering a complex social arena where they need to gain peer acceptance and learn to initiate and maintain friendships. They may often need to deal with rebuffs, rejection and the frequent breaking up of friendships in ways that are not typical of adult friendships (Besag 2007).

Not all children initially have the social competence, confidence and emotional capacity needed to negotiate these relationships in a fulfilling way. Also, classmates can vary significantly in terms of how friendly and inclusive they are. A UNICEF report (2007) indicated considerable variation between countries on how helpful and friendly classroom peers were perceived to be. Research has shown that how schools organise and group pupils in schools can act to promote friendships and inclusion across, for example, different racial groups (Hallinan and Williams 1989).

Knowledge and understanding of the developmental tasks of friendships at particular ages supports the identification of effective interventions. Indeed, there are numerous resources now available to help children and whole classes develop friendly relationships. This chapter includes sections on friendship development in the early years, middle childhood and adolescence. Each of these sections outlines research on the psychological significance of each developmental phase and concludes by providing examples of effective interventions and resources available.

## 8.2 Friendship in Social and Cultural Contexts

Friendship can be defined as a reciprocal relationship where there is mutual liking and enjoyment spent in each other's company.

Whilst we may feel that we make our own choices of friends in what are generally regarded as voluntary relationships, the social and cultural context can influence friendship choice and opportunities for friendship (Chu 2005; Way et al. 2005). Freaan (2003) cites the work of Graham Allan, a Professor of Social Relations, who pointed out that whilst these relationships are perceived to be personal and voluntary, they are still determined, to a large extent, by ethnicity, class, age, gender and geography. I would suggest that this might indicate that there are unnecessary constraints that restrict possibilities for friendship.

With regard to gender, for example, most people agree that there are some gender differences observable in the friendships and social networks of both children and adults. Typically, the friendships and social network of boys and men might be centred on activities such as football or other sports. For girls and women, the focus might be on opportunities for conversation and the specific activity, if there is one, of less importance.

The relationships described above might be viewed as stereotypical and a reflection of the influence of society and culture on the gendered expectations of girls and boys in respect of toys, play companions and friendships and women and

men in terms of leisure activities and acceptable patterns of friendship. With regard to the former, for example, a parent of a young boy might be perfectly happy that he enjoys using the dressing up box for imaginative play. She might have more concerns when her son requests to be an Angel in the Christmas play alongside female peers rather than as a shepherd with his male peers! As noticeable gender patterns in friendships would seem to be determined, at least in part, by social and/or cultural expectations, we need to avoid making assumptions based on such expectations in order not to impose restrictions on the possibilities for friendship. Not all boys and men like football, and the fact that we now have girls and women's football teams is testament to the fact that some girls and women very much enjoy football!

This chapter is primarily focused on the many positive aspects of friendship. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that some friendships/aspects of a friendship are not so positive. In most friendships, there is a feeling of reciprocity and of being on an approximately equal footing with each other. Qualities of each person may be perceived as different though complement each other's needs and aspirations. Some friendships, however, may contain more negative qualities. They might be perceived to be less equal and reciprocal; there may be an uneven balance of power. A friend who perceives themselves to be less powerful in this situation may at times feel put upon and not valued.

Other less-than-positive friendships may encourage participation in undesirable behaviours such as exclusion, bullying, risk taking and other antisocial behaviours. Leather (2009) found that adolescents who had been excluded from school were more likely to form associations with others and participate in unsociable and risky behaviours in the community. Roffey (2011) asserts that more inclusive environments where students feel connected to school and community are likely to discourage the development of negative groupings, such as gangs. Providing opportunities in schools and in the community where friendships and positive relationships can be sustained amongst diverse life styles and cultures is of benefit to all. The suggested strategies, interventions and resources in this chapter show how more inclusive environments for children and young people can be developed where friendships and positive social relationships are enhanced.

### **8.3 Friendship, the Peer Group and Social Networks**

Researchers have defined friendship as distinct from acceptance by the peer group (people of similar age and status) although both involve perceptions of likeability. Wentzel, Baker and Russell (2009) define the distinction: 'The central distinction between having friends and involvement with larger peer groups is that friends reflect relatively private, egalitarian relationships often formed on the basis of idiosyncratic criteria' (p. 231). Whereas in peer groups, there are publicly known and readily identified and valued group characteristics.

Being accepted by peers may be a first step for many children in friendship formation. Whilst peer acceptance does provide a threshold for friendship, there is evidence that some children who are not generally accepted by peers are still able to form and maintain friendships. Ladd (2005) reviewed research which found that children with social difficulties, those with a tendency towards aggression, abused children and rejected children were able to form friendships. However, he also found that these friendships could have both positive and negative qualities, for instance containing higher levels of conflict.

Whilst research has historically explored and compared friendship and the peer group, recent research has highlighted the complexity of children's friendships and peer relations (Howe 2010). It has been noted that children have social relationships in a variety of social contexts which are dynamic and subject to change. Recent research has investigated children's social networks, which, as Baines and Blatchford (2009) describe, is a term that covers a range of relationships including 'the group of peers they most often hang about with' and friendship networks. A child may have social networks at school and outside of school. There may be a social network connected to a particular activity. Within these groups, some children will have a hierarchy of best friends, friends and network members to play with when the best friend is not available, whilst others prefer to have a group of friends rather than designated best friends.

## 8.4 The Developmental Significance of Friendships

Newcomb and Bagwell (1996) conducted a quantitative meta-analysis of studies comparing reciprocal friends and acquaintances. The studies covered children from preschool years up to and including early adolescence. Significant differences were found. Friendship relations were characterised by more positive engagement, conflict management, task activity and relationship properties than did acquaintances. Interestingly, there was no difference in the instances of conflict, but friends were then motivated to problem-solve to overcome the conflict, leaving the friendship intact. They conclude: 'The developmental significance of these friendship features may rest in the opportunity they afford children to experience and to practice these critical components of effective interpersonal relations'. (p. 298)

Friendships have a role to play in supporting transitions at various developmental stages throughout the life cycle. In a longitudinal study, Ladd (1990) found that young children showed better adjustments to school and educational attainments if they already had friends in their class when starting school and kept these as well as making new friends. Berndt and Keefe (1992) found that having friends when transferring to different grades and schools was associated with less psychological disturbance in adolescence. Hartup and Stevens (1999) conclude that friendships throughout the life cycle are of developmental significance, but caution that: 'Whether friendships are developmental assets or liabilities depends on several conditions, especially the characteristics of one's friends and the quality of one's relationships with them' (p. 79).

## 8.5 Friendships Throughout the Life Cycle

Friendships are an important feature of our lives from the early years into adulthood. The nature and quality of these friendships change over time. A developmental perspective of friendships throughout the life cycle helps us to understand the significance and purposes served by friendships at different developmental phases.

Sullivan (1953) theorised that we have distinct social needs that could also be conceptualised as developmental tasks to accomplish at key phases in our development. In infancy, we have a need for security and nurturing from those that are close to us. In the early years (2–6 years), children need to join in play and activities with others. In middle childhood (7–12 years), children have a need to make friends and gain acceptance from their peers. As they move towards adolescence (13–19 years), children have a need for intimacy in their friendships, and in later adolescence, a desire to develop more intimate relationships including sexual relationships. Subsequent research over the years provides evidence to support this theoretical framework. I will draw on some of these research studies in this chapter. As Buhrmester (1996) comments, developmental researchers view the progressive accomplishment of these developmental tasks as enabling the formation of satisfying and fulfilling relationships in adulthood. Thus, friendships in childhood not only have an immediate ongoing impact but also have a formative impact on friendships in adulthood.

## 8.6 The Early Years

As Rubin (1980) notes, these early friendships provide opportunities for participating and learning about self and relationships in ways that cannot be met in other relationships such as the parent–child relationship.

Studies by psychologists provide evidence that, whilst there is much variation at this age, even young children can show preferences for particular playmates, seeking them out, playing cooperatively with them and showing the beginnings of empathy (e.g. Dunn 2004; Howes 1996). As Dunn (2004) points out, these findings challenge conventional notions that children are not able to form significant friendships until they are 7 or 8 years of age. Qualitative ethnographic studies where young children's interactions in early years settings have been carefully observed over extended time periods have also documented a wide range of skills, behaviours and understandings that children draw on in establishing and maintaining their friendships (Rubin 1980; Meyer 2003; Meyer and Driscoll 1997; Rizzo 1989). Meyer and Driscoll (1997) identified ten categories of strategies used by young children in a day care centre to establish, maintain and terminate friendships. These included proximity, listening, touch, expressing feelings, making jokes, using humour or teasing, making statements about the friendship, engaging in conflict, directing/controlling others, invoking rules and participating in pretend role play where there were shared expectations.

Rubin (1980) provides an example of two 4-year olds, where in a conversation one child becomes aware that he has hurt his friend's feelings and is able to take steps to successfully redress the situation:

- David: I'm a missile robot who can shoot missiles out of my fingers. I can shoot them out of everywhere – even out of my legs. I am a missile robot.  
 Josh: (tauntingly) No, you're a fart robot.  
 David: (protestingly) No, I'm a missile robot.  
 Josh: No, you're a fart robot.  
 David: (hurt, almost in tears) No, Josh!  
 Josh: (recognizing that David is upset) And I'm a poo- poo robot.  
 David: (in good spirits again) I'm a pee-pee robot (p. 58).

Developmental psychologists have highlighted the importance of play in these early years, and particularly role play/pretend play between friends, as being crucial to developing social and emotional understanding and cognitive skills (Dunn 2004; Harris 2000). Harris' research demonstrates that when children use their imagination in shared pretence role plays with others, they are able to further their understanding of the real world and to distinguish it from fantasy, and to appreciate perspectives of others. In fact, as Harris points out, it is when children have difficulty in using their imagination in this way, as is the case for children on the autistic spectrum for example, that children experience difficulties in social and cognitive understanding and relating successfully with others.

Dunn (2004) comments that young friendships can be a means of emotional support. She gives the examples of a close friendship being supportive when there are significant life events, e.g. at a time when a sibling is born or on transferring from nursery to school. As Dunn notes: 'It is with the development of the features of shared feelings and ideas, of mutual affection and attachment, of concern for the other, which lead eventually to commitment and loyalty ...' (p. 3).

Like Harris, Dunn also comments on the significance of shared role play with friends. Findings reveal that pretend play between friends is more sustained and harmonious and more complex than play with acquaintances. She concludes that the shared fantasies are important in the development of the friendship: 'Sharing that pretend world can be a key setting for the growth of intimacy, and sharing the excitement generated by the fantasy; it may also perhaps be an important context for sharing what is worrying, as well as exciting' (p. 28).

It is important to consider that, as Smith (2010) notes, children who have experienced disadvantaged environments often do show impoverished pretend play. Early interventions are required to support play and communication skills in order to promote optimal conditions for friendship formation and educational progression.

### ***8.6.1 Implications for Positive Practice***

- In early years settings, aim for a small group size (up to 12 children). This provides optimal conditions for pretend play and the development of quality friendships (Smith and Connolly 1980).

- Provide a space and props to encourage creative shared role play. So in addition to a themed home corner, have alternative periods where space is available with a variety of materials, e.g. dressing up clothes, boxes, screens, sheets of material etc., for children to develop their own shared themes. Broadhead (2004) uses the term the 'Whatever you want it to be' place for this resource.
- Where children are having difficulties in peer relations and friendships, carry out observations to clarify their skills and highlight areas for development. A useful tool for observing play is 'The Social Play Continuum' in Broadhead's (2004) book, *Early Years Play and Learning*.
- Provide guidance, model and comment on friendly behaviour.
- Supervise at a distance. Give children time to learn to sort out conflicts and support where needed.
- Provide opportunities to talk things through with a child when there has been upset and conflict. This helps the child understand their own feelings and those of others (Dunn 2004).
- Use role play with puppets where the children can practise a wide range of friendship skills, including how to gain entry to a group or deal with being turned down (Webster-Stratton 2009).
- Encourage parents to invite playmates home and support this by providing information on friendships in the playgroup/class room and with ideas for activities if required (Webster-Stratton 2009).
- Provide activities and opportunities which invite children to take turns and share, e.g. dressing up clothes and props, and wheeled toys designed for two children to ride (Dowling 2010).
- Use storybooks on friendships to raise awareness and discuss features of friendships.
- For children transferring to school and needing to develop language/communication and social and early learning skills, set up friendship groups. In this approach, an adult such as a teaching assistant works with a group of up to four children for half an hour a day. The emphasis is on participating in enjoyable activities rather than more structured educational activities. Cooking, art activities and growing plants and gardening are ideal activities. This safe space can be used to facilitate verbal and non-verbal communication, interactive play and friendly behaviours.
- A useful resource with activities for very young children and up to age 5 years is: *100 ideas for teaching personal, social and emotional development* (Thwaites 2008).

## 8.7 Friendship in Middle Childhood

As children move into middle childhood, play with others continues to be an important factor in developing social networks and friendships. The form of play is in pretence games and also physical, rule-based games, e.g. ball games, chase, skipping with elastic etc., often with a competitive element.

Blatchford (1998) researched children aged 8–9 years transferring to junior school and monitored their friendship formation and the stability of friendship groups over the year. He observed that games played at break time in the school served two important functions. First, the variety of games played at break time provided a structure to enable children to have contact with other children on transfer to the junior school, and this social networking supported friendship formation. Blatchford noted that initially there was a flurry of activity as children sought out friendships. Later on in the school year, however, friendship groups stabilised, and entry to games was more exclusive as they were entwined with particular friendship groups.

Interestingly, some of the children interviewed about why children had particular friends spoke of best friends transcending the game connection: Their best friends were those that were always available to play with – e.g. John told the researcher that best friends were always available to play with and there when needed, so that: ‘sometimes Graham doesn’t play with me and sometimes Shawn doesn’t but Tim always does though we play different games’ (p. 79).

This view of friendship was also apparent in the interviews carried out by Wordley (2010), who carried out in-depth interviews with a small sample of 8-year-old children regarding their classroom friendships and learning.

Guy: ‘...Anthony is a good friend cos like if you don’t have anyone to play with or something, he’ll always be willing to come and play with you or stop what he’s doing, or maybe ask you if what he was doing, you might want to go and play with him with some of your friends’.

In another interview with Mia:

Claire: So what’s a difference between a friend and a best friend?

Mia: Well, ‘cos like Gemma and Holly mostly play with me and like Amelia plays with someone else but occasionally she plays with me.

Baines and Blatchford (2011) highlight the importance of school break times or recess as being one of the main opportunities for children to play with friends and develop friendships. They note that break times are particularly valuable as children today have less opportunity for unsupervised activities and contact with others outside of school. This situation, they suggest, may be due at least in part to increasing parental concerns about child safety and heightened parental supervision as a result. Baines and Blatchford are therefore concerned to note that these periods in the school day are increasingly being abolished or shortened in countries such as the USA, Australia and the UK. School staffs frequently cite problem behaviour and needing time for teaching the curriculum as reasons for reducing break times. Baines and Blatchford comment that whilst there are substantial campaigns across many countries to enhance play facilities outside of school, there are few such campaigns to protect break time/recess.

At this stage of development, as parents and teachers are often aware, there may be frequent making and breaking of friendships as children develop their social and communication skills and their ability to manage their emotions. Wordley’s (2010)



interview with Laura, aged 8 years, gives a flavour of the ebb and flow in these relationships and Laura's awareness of the process:

Lisa, Carmel and Jacinta they do normally have fall outs but they're like one day Jacinta and Carmel are friends and they leave Lisa out because they all have an argument and then the next day Jacinta and Lisa and then the next Carmel and Lisa and Jacinta gets left out and it goes all around like that...

This quote also serves to illustrate a distinctive feature of this developmental phase in that children tend to form same-sex social networks and friendships. It is thought that children seek same-sex social networks because they share similar interests and play styles (Maccoby 1998). Baines and Blatchford (2009) carried out research comparing girls' and boys' social networks and friendships in the playground. They found, as has previous research, that boys tended to form larger social networks than girls, consisting of both friends and non-friends. Girls' social networks were smaller and consisted mainly of best friends and friends.

### ***8.7.1 Social Networks Outside of School***

Most research on children's social networks has been carried out in the school context, and there is a need to research on children's social networks and friendships outside of school. This is particularly as there have been significant changes in children's opportunities to spend time with their friends and in the nature of communicating and maintaining friendships. Thus, with regard to the latter, children frequently maintain friendships through texting and using their mobile phones and online 'chat forums'.

Layard and Dunn (2009) view the pace and change of this decade, of society in general and of experiences of childhood in particular, as unprecedented, and that we need to consider the impact on children and young people. Friendship was one of the seven themes explored by The Good Childhood Inquiry panel. This Inquiry set out to consider experiences of all children in the United Kingdom and made comparisons with research findings from other countries. Layard and Dunn note that there are fewer areas for safe play and that children have much less freedom to go out with friends unsupervised. Thus, some parents spend much of their time ferrying their children to supervised activities and parties. Other parents may not have the resources to do this, and children remain at home, sometimes spending large amounts of time on the computer.

To conclude, in the middle school years, children recognise and develop a range of friendships with differing qualities according to whether they are casual friends, good friends or best friends. Towards the end of middle childhood, children are increasingly making friendship choices based on personality, and there is a level of intimacy in a growing awareness of sharing and supporting. As Doll (2010) points out, these friendships involve a degree of loyalty, and children need to balance their

own interests with the needs of their friend. They therefore need to be able to see a situation from their friend's perspective and to make small compromises.

### 8.7.2 *Implications for Positive Practice*

- Children need increased access to recreation spaces in the community, including playgrounds and playing fields for unsupervised play (Layard and Dunn 2009).
- Children need to have opportunities to participate in a range of activities outside of school to sustain interests and friendships with others.
- Interventions should make optimal use of the school playground to provide enjoyable play space and opportunities to make and consolidate friendships. Involve the children in designing an exciting school playground that meets the diverse needs and desires of the children. Children could survey classmates to find out what they would like. The playground needs to provide places for physical activities such as football and chase games, and also quieter activities. Include a signposted friends meeting place where children can go to if they want someone to play with or talk to.
- Some schools have trained and supported a team of children (squad) to befriend others in the playground and help sort out disputes over games.
- An excellent resource for developing the play ground is *Resilient Playgrounds* by Beth Doll with Katherine Brehm (2010).
- Discuss friendships and friendly behaviour as a class. Agree on class principles which would aim to ensure that individuals are valued, difference is accepted and that all are included in play and work activities.
- Use Circle Time to talk through and resolve friendship issues/unfriendly behaviour as they arise. A useful book is *Circle Time Resources* (Robinson and Maines 2004).
- Provide activities in the classroom that invite collaboration, e.g. solving a science problem or shared story writing. Provide adult commentary on helpful and friendly behaviour.
- Provide opportunities for children to work with their friends on problem tasks.
- Provide opportunities at other times for children to get used to working with different members of the class.
- This is probably the best time for group work to develop the skills and social understanding of children who are finding it difficult to gain peer acceptance and establish friendships. Three useful resources for middle childhood are:
  - *The Friendship Formula: A Social Skills Programme to Develop an Awareness of Self and Others* (Schroeder 2008).
  - *How to Promote Children's Social and Emotional Competence* (Webster-Stratton 2009), particularly Chapter 10: *Peer Problems and Friendship*.
  - *Developing Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills* (Costi 2009).

- Parents and teachers need to value children's friendships. They need to encourage children to make friends and maintain friendships, e.g. following a change of school and moving house. Children need opportunities to have their friends stay with them for both play and study (Layard and Dunn 2009).

## 8.8 Adolescent Friendships

At this phase of development, friends and the social networks they are contained within become increasingly important and enable a range of developmental needs to be met. Young people have a need for companionship and a growing intimacy alongside meeting the challenge of new life experiences including transition to high school and later transitions to university and/or work involving changes in friendships and social networks.

School continues to be an important source of friends. Hamm and Faircloth (2005) found that these friendships played a vital role in enabling adolescents to develop a sense of belonging to the school. They describe such a sense of belonging as relating to: 'students' perceptions that they are liked, respected, and valued by others in the school' (p. 61).

Hamm and Faircloth found that school friendships provided a secure base that helped adolescents to cope with the social context of the high school.

Researchers of peer relations, friendships and school break time have commented that in contrast to early years and middle childhood, adolescent friendships are characterised by a lack of play, games and physical activities at break time, and there is more emphasis on opportunities to talk and to 'hanging around' together (Blatchford 1998). He comments that break times for older students in secondary schools provide an important function in providing loosely supervised areas where adolescent girls and boys can socialise.

At this time, adolescents need to develop their sense of identity and belonging, and interactions with friends and friendship groups facilitate this. As Cotterell (2007) notes: 'Two particular social provisions that are supplied by friends as a group are social integration into a friendship network and reassurance of worth through the social validation of friends' (p. 80).

Adolescent friends serve a very important purpose in providing acceptance and emotional support at a time when they are becoming more independent and less reliant on parents. The level of intimacy in a friendship is an indicator both of the maturing quality of friendship and, indeed, predicts wellbeing and self-esteem in adolescence (Buhrmester 1990). Loyalty also distinguishes adolescent friendships from other relationships. There may be gender differences here in that girls and women's friendships are often characterised as having a greater level of intimacy and self-disclosure. Thus, it could be argued that this facilitates more emotional support than that available within male friendships.

There is, however, a need to challenge assumptions made about male friendships. Recent qualitative research studies challenge assumptions that boys do not want

close friendships (Chu 2005; Way et al. 2005). Chu (2005) found that adolescent boys interviewed in this study actually did want to have close male friendships, though some felt that needing to prove masculinity and protect vulnerability were barriers to such friendships.

Optimistically, Chu notes that despite these barriers, some adolescent boys did form close friendships, and these friendships actually supported them in dealing with male peer pressure to conform:

Ethan: When I was thirteen, I met my closest friend right now, and he really helped me to become who I want to become. I felt like we both kind of helped each other grow into, like, who we want to be right now. Up until that time, I'd kind of been thinking, 'Well, I don't really like this, so why am I doing it?' but continued to do it, like just dressing all neat and trying to impress everyone I met and trying to be, like, the perfect kid. But in meeting my friend, he really helped—we both helped each other a lot to become who we are right now. And we both like who we are right now, to some extent (p. 16).

Way et al. (2005), in a study of ethnic-minority urban adolescents, found that both girls and boys desired close friendships, and they did not differ in emphasising the keeping of secrets and self-disclosure as important features of their closest friendships. Cotterell (2007) cautions about making assumptions about gender differences in intimacy and communication and urges that there should be a closer examination of gender differences in styles of intimacy and communication to enhance a greater understanding.

As Scholte and Van Aken (2008) comment, friendships are formed where 'common ground' and 'affirmations' about the friendship are made. Whilst perceived similarities might be important in establishing the common ground, they become less important as the friendship becomes established. Maintenance of the friendship is dependent on the quality of the friendship. Thus, friendships which are emotionally supportive, and where there is trust and intimacy, may well survive for many years. Other friendships which may have these qualities to a much lesser degree are unlikely to survive in the long run.

Outside of school, young people continue to develop a range of interconnected friendship groups or cliques, within a larger peer crowd or social cluster (Cotterell 2007). Membership of these groups is fluid and changeable. As in middle childhood, within these groups, adolescents are likely to have some close friendships and more casual friends and acquaintances. Whilst most adolescents will still enjoy spending time with a small group of same-sex friends, they also seek opportunities and are excited to be part of large mixed sex crowds, e.g. at parties, or music concerts, or simply at the beach, park or street corner. This wider social cluster provides opportunities for mixed sex friendship groups or cliques in later adolescence and for romantic relationships.

There is a need for communities to consider activities, spaces and resources to meet the social and leisure needs of adolescence, some of whom report that there is nothing for them to do or go to. It is also apparent that in early adolescence, some who might have confidently tried new activities as a child lack social confidence to go to clubs and activities unless accompanied by a friend and are also much influenced by what their peer group might consider to be 'cool' or 'un-cool'.

### **8.8.1 Implications for Positive Practice**

- There is a need to work with young people to identify stimulating and supportive areas where young people can meet.
- Layard and Dunn (2009) recommend the setting up of Young People's Centres which offer high-quality activities such as IT, music, drama and dance, sport and volunteering as well as psychological support and careers advice.
- Interventions should aim to support transitions to establish positive peer relations and to provide new friendships to flourish: *B.E.S.T. Buddies Bettering Everyone's Secondary Transition: A comprehensive training programme introducing a peer buddy system to support students starting secondary school* (Smith 2003).

### **8.8.2 Friendship Transition Groups**

Short-term group work during transition for adolescents who lack confidence and might be overwhelmed by the social and organisational expectations of secondary school can be very effective. For example, a summer project could involve 1 week of the summer holiday. In this time, staff from Education Support Services could run an orientation group in the secondary school. Activities could include games that enable the young people to find their way around the school and activities to raise self-esteem and promote positive interactions and involvement in social and leisure activities. These young people start school feeling knowledgeable and confident, already knowing some new people.

Other schools have run Friendship Groups for socially vulnerable pupils on transfer to secondary school. These could be run weekly by staff from Education Support Services for the first term. The aim is to provide a secure base to develop trusting relationships, in order to express feelings and worries. Activities are provided to develop communication and assertiveness skills, friendship, self-esteem and problem-solving skills. Initially, the sessions need to be structured and contain several activities. As the young people develop trust and confidence and communication skills, they are able to use the group to discuss their situations and problem solve and to support each other. Experience of running these groups has shown that adolescents are not looking to adults to sort out problems. Group members often do have the resources amongst themselves to support each other and problem solve given appropriate opportunities to do so.

Interventions should develop a sense of belonging by offering a wide range of after-school clubs catering for a diversity of interests. They should also provide a range of activities for boys as this provides a focus for their relationships.

Peer support improves both learning and positive interactions: *Peer Support Works: A Step by Step Guide to Long Term Success* (Cartwright 2007).

## 8.9 Friendships in Adult Life

In later adolescence and into adulthood, friendships are important though time is also increasingly spent with romantic partners. Most adults will also go on to become parents. The traditional view of family and social relations puts family ties before friendships. Pahl and Spence (2003-4) assert that this does not reflect the reality of people's lives and the complexity of social relationships. They put forward a model of 'personal communities' to describe an individual's commitments to family and friends. Thus, an individual will have a high commitment to specific family members ('given' relationships in the sense that blood ties are not chosen) and friends ('chosen' relationships in the sense that friendships are primarily voluntary relationships). A lower level of commitment will be shown to other given (family) and chosen (friends) relationships. This model allows for the power of informal support structures to be recognised.

Close friendships, sometimes formed at school, may endure over years and may well last into adulthood. These would constitute high commitment 'chosen' relationships in Pahl and Spence's model. Cotterell (2007) lists the 'distinctive qualities' of sustaining a friendship as: 'sharing enjoyable activities, being loyal and available, being ready to assist, being sensitive to friend's feelings, expressing confidence in the friends, and providing comfort and optimism in times of difficulty' (p. 80).

A small-scale study for this publication was conducted in order to shed light on the defining features of long-lasting friendships. Questionnaires on best friends were completed by 30 adults aged between 24 and 59 years. This included men and women, predominantly white British; 33% were from different nationalities. Whilst the sample was small, some clear patterns emerged. 94% of friendships were same sex, and 87% of friendships were same age or within 1 year. Most had met their friend at school or university (73%). The length of friendship was between 5 and 49 years. The questionnaire asked an open-ended question on why people thought the friendship with their best friend had endured. The following themes were identified:

- Shared experience/interests/values
- Good company/humour/fun/get on well/relaxed
- Trust/loyalty/open/talk about anything/acceptance
- Reciprocity/both make time/bond

Some friendships had endured despite those friends not living nearby: 44% said that their friend did not live nearby and in some cases lived in a different country.

## 8.10 Conclusion

Having a range of social networks and fulfilling friendships is important to our wellbeing. An understanding of the complexity of social interactions to be negotiated over the life cycle is a prerequisite for adults aiming to promote an environment

for others where friendships can begin and flourish. Positive interventions can be designed that are helpful in ensuring optimal conditions for the development of friendship skills.

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