

Innovation in Autism Practice: The Future is Calling

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Friendship and Sociality in Autism Services

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‘Friendships and Social Opportunities’ practice research project

- **Action Research formulated in response to supported autistic people’s concerns**
- **Practitioner researchers as community of practice**
- **Focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation**
- **Final staff workshop, 45 participants**

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Research on Autism and Friendship

- **Standardised Friendship Quality Measures** (e.g. Bukowski, Hoza, and Boivin 1994)
- **Score companionship; security and intimacy; closeness; help and conflict: lower friendship satisfaction reported** (Petrina, Carter and Stephenson 2014)
- **Difficulties with reciprocity and reciprocal nomination reported among autistic children** (Carrington et al, 2003, Chamberlain et al 2007)
- **But ... some autistic children still reported lower loneliness, valued companionship, shared activities and interests, balanced with time alone** (Chamberlain et al. 2007, Rowley et al. 2012)

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Supported people's perspectives on friendship

"Friends are very good. They help out. They understand what I'm coming from and I understand what they're coming from.

(Alan)"

"Well they're always there for me and comforting. I can trust them. And, well, part of friendship in a way is they've been with you all the time, like from the beginning"

(Doug)

"Somebody who can talk to you and share the most inner secrets with ... and not trying to report it to the [service staff]."

(Gordon)

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Practitioner perceptions of friendship

- Some supported people want to make friends but are unsure how
- Some supported autistic people lacked enough social opportunities
- Some supported people have difficulty with social reciprocity
- Supported people display meaningful social attachments within services
- Difficulties navigating relationships between practitioners and supported people
- Social media creates both opportunities and tensions

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Practitioner perceptions of friendship

Identified theme	Indicative comments
<p>Supported people display meaningful social attachments within services.</p>	<p><i>John was working on the computer and he printed something out. He printed one out for all the others, and when asked why, he said “for friends”. .. because he has done other things with them, he perceives they are friends.</i></p> <p><i>I think they are friends because when he sees him his face lights up.</i></p> <p><i>He found it difficult when another service user had left the service. They used to do things together... you could tell that he missed the other service user.</i></p>

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Practitioner perceptions of friendship

Identified theme	Indicative comments
<p>There are difficulties navigating relationships and boundaries between staff and the adults they support</p>	<p><i>Some of them may see staff as friends, and you have to explain that it is different, that you are there to support them.</i></p> <p><i>Some of the staff working with him in the team I had at the time, he was wanting to class us as friends and he wanted to get in touch and have a chat at the weekend and things like that. I felt really cruel sometimes. You had to be really blunt.</i></p> <p><i>It is a difficult one because you are spending masses and masses of time with them. You are gaining their trust, you're caring for them; you are having fun with them. You build relationships and everything.</i></p> <p><i>I keep in contact ... I think that it is important if somebody has known you for 8 or 9 years.</i></p>

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Diverse sociality

‘human sociality consists of a range of possibilities for social coordination with others, and autistic sociality is one of these possible coordinations.’

(Ochs and Solomon, 2010:70).

Learning from the concept of neurodiversity led us to think in terms of ‘diverse sociality’

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Providing social opportunities

Doug: I was sceptical about going in the first place because I thought I was giving myself a label by going there.

Interviewer: That's something it's important for you to avoid, do you feel?

Doug: Yeah, I try not to think about it too much. I try to be myself

Interviewer: Do you prefer socialising with your autistic friends compared to say, a group of people who are not on the spectrum?

Simon: Yeah I do. As I said, I just feel we have more in common and familiarity. I just feel they understand me more compared with people who are neurotypical.

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Facilitating diverse sociality

- Shared activities as focus
- Allowing different intensity of engagement, 'waves of socialising', reflected in social spaces
- Social groups as catalysts for friendships

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Findings

- Some support staff recognised difficulties supported people had in maintaining friendships based on social reciprocity. However, other staff observed alternative forms of sociality and interaction that appeared meaningful to those they support.
- Autistic individuals differed in their attitudes to dedicated social groups, but several found value in the company of other autistic people and have made friends through social groups set up by the organisation
- Both staff and autistic individuals that they support report ambiguity and uncertainty about the social attachments formed between them in the course of day-to-day support practice.

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Recommendations

- Staff are encouraged to take a broad, non-normative understanding of friendship and diverse sociality in order to recognise and nurture meaningful relationships and social experiences for the people they support.
- A clearer account and understanding of relationships between staff and autistic individuals in support services is needed to understand how these relationships might be better managed and how they impact upon the wellbeing and life experiences of supported autistic people.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the supported autistic people who shared their thoughts and experiences

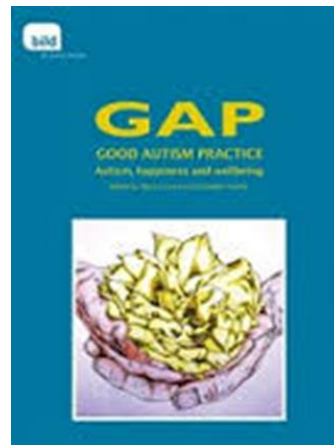
The practitioner research project team:

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Long J., Brown J., Daly, S., Gibson, K. and McNeillis, C.
(2018) Friendships and sociality in autism services, *Good
Autism Practice* (19.1) 22-31



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