A Good Friend is Hard to Find: Friendship Among Adolescents With Disabilities

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Abstract

We asked 27 Euro American teens ages 16 to 17 with developmental disabilities in Los Angeles to describe friendships. Eleven characteristics of friendship reported in the research literature (similarity, proximity, transcending context, companionship, reciprocity, mutuality, intimacy, support, trust/loyalty, conflict management, and stability) were mentioned by at least some teens. However, most teens focused on companionship, doing activities across contexts, similarity in interests/personality, sheer proximity, and stability. Gender did not influence number or types of themes reported. Teens with higher IQ/Vineland Communication scores mentioned more friendship themes and were less positive about their friendships. Most teens reported some satisfying friendships, and friendships between peers with developmental disability usually were more stable and positive than friendships with typically developing peers.

Parents of adolescents with disabilities worry about the social relationships of their teens, including whether or not they are able to establish and maintain satisfying friendships. Friendships are important in facilitating well-being, including positive adjustment, prosocial behavior, and self-esteem (Hartup, 1993; Sullivan, 1953). Sustaining a full friendship is not easy for anyone, and teens with developmental disabilities face far more problems than most in finding and keeping friends (Siperstein & Leffert, 1997; Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988). However, very little is known about the characteristics of friendships among adolescents with disabilities from the perspective of the individuals most directly involved: the adolescents themselves.

Friendship has multiple meanings in our culture and varies across cultures, though with some common dimensions (Keller, 2004). The many dimensions of friendship commonly reported in the literature and used in everyday understanding include similarity, proximity, transcending context, companionship, reciprocity, mutuality, help/support, conflict management, stability, trust/loyalty, and intimacy/disclosure (Berndt, 1989; Bukowski,

Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996a). Friendships among youth with disabilities often are compared to and assessed by these dimensions of friendship relationships, which in large part are derived from research with typically developing teens and from the general research literature on friendship rather than from the perspectives of teens with disabilities. In this report, we consider the concepts and experiences of friendship from the points of view of the teens themselves.

The features or themes of friendship described in the literature on typically developing children and adolescents show fundamental consistencies as well as developmental changes (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Two consistently important themes are proximity and similarity. Physical proximity to peers in school, church, neighborhoods, and so forth, leads to opportunities to select a friend (Staub, 1998). Proximity must be considered in light of the broader social circumstances of a given child (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). The types of settings and peers available clearly influence the formation and maintenance of friendships. Although proximity provides the initial opportunity, similarity in background, such as age, gender, race, and activities,

helps someone to establish an initial connection with another (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Once the friendship has started, friends usually move beyond the setting where the friendship began, often with parental help at younger ages. Asher et al. stated that "children must conceive of friendship as a relationship that transcends a specific context, and children must possess social skills for initiating contact outside the setting where the children typically interact" (p. 388). They also argued that friendships that do transcend contexts are "richer and there is an investment in and a commitment towards a friend that deepens with multiple setting contacts" (p. 389).

Companionship, or doing things together, is another feature of friendship that emerges early and remains important (Berndt, 1996). Companionship helps to maintain the relationship and is a way to assess its strength and closeness (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Once companionship has been established, the friendship tends to move deeper into a reciprocal and mutual relationship. Piaget noted the importance of reciprocity or a give-and-take relationship between two people and suggested that friendships without this were lower in quality (Piaget, 1965). Van der Klift and Kunc (1994) warned that one-sided "help is not and can never be the basis of friendship" (pp. 393–394) because it then loses the reciprocity that is essential in maintaining a balanced friendship. Mutuality, or the idea that both partners in the relationship choose to be with each other and that they nominate each other as friends (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989) also is important.

Support is a key aspect of friendship that becomes more salient during early adolescence (Berndt, 1989). Berndt described school-age children as being as likely to compete with friends as they are to provide limited support, whereas adolescents become more sensitive to each other's needs. When teens are distressed, they look to friends for understanding, compassion, and help. This help can take many forms, including guidance and advice; instrumental support, such as lending money for bus fare; and emotional support, for example, being a shoulder to cry on (Parker & Asher, 1993; Turnbull, Blue-Banning, & Pereira, 2000).

Aspects of friendship that show increases from middle childhood to early adolescence include conflict management and stability. Friends will disagree and argue, but a sign of a deeper relationship is that they are able to manage conflicts and resolve their differences (Berndt, 1996; Bukowski et al., 1994; Parker & Asher, 1993). If the friends are able to maintain a fairly conflict-free relationship then stability will develop. Stability, consistency, and reliability are all important in maintaining friendship (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Asher et al., 1996; Turnbull et al., 2000).

Defining themes of friendship that develop during adolescence include trust, loyalty, and intimacy (Sullivan, 1953). Typically developing teens expect that friends will not leave or betray each other (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996b) and can trust each other with intimate details without being judgmental. During adolescence, close friends disclose personal information and feel an emotional bond to each other. Intimacy through personal disclosure is a step beyond mutuality that deepens the relationship (Hirsch & Dubois, 1989; Wiener & Sunohara, 1998). Overall, doing things together, having similar behaviors and preferences, and liking and being liked develop earlier; expectations of trust, disclosure, mutual respect, dealing with conflicts, being able to count on the other person, and intimacy come later. These are the normative expectations for a fully realized friendship and for competent friends.

Do friendships among adolescents with disabilities fit these features? Simply considering the list of features might make us dubious as to how well friendships of youth with developmental disabilities would fit because even typically developing youth and adults may have only a few such friendships. Furthermore, the varied kinds of disabilities themselves can make friendship-like relationships difficult. If teens have trouble communicating, lack cognitive and memory skills, or have significant mobility problems, for example, achieving the goal of a normatively defined and research-confirmed "close friendship" with others becomes all the more difficult. The issue of proximity may be of particular salience for adolescents with disabilities because the school setting may be the primary or indeed only access to peer social experiences. Further, the type of school program (e.g., more or less inclusive classroom placements) may have an impact on the pool of potential friends (Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988). Some youth may prefer more inclusive school situations, whereas others may prefer separate school environments because they feel less "different" and more comfortable with peers more like them (Marcus, 2005).

Researchers examining friendships among students with disabilities have found that although students report that they have friendships, these friendships are often less intimate (Stevens, Steele, Jutai, & Kalnins, 1996), less stable, more prone to conflict (Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988), and are of lower self-reported quality than those of typically developing peers (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). A number of studies have been focused on relationships between children with disabilities and their typically developing peers (Siperstein, Leffert, & Wenz-Gross, 1997; Staub, 1998; Turnbull et al., 2000; Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988). These studies have provided rich detail on the qualities, benefits, and limitations of this type of friendship. Increased parental facilitation usually is involved in establishing and maintaining these friendships outside the school setting (Turnbull, Pereira, & Blue-Banning, 1999). There is less information on friendships when both friends have disabilities. In existing studies investigators have relied on parent report (Weiner & Sunohara, 1998), focused on higher functioning children (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000), or examined classroom social structure rather than individual friendships (Siperstein & Bak, 1989). Although Siperstein and Bak did not describe dyadic friendship experiences in their study of adolescents with moderate mental retardation, they found that social relationship patterns in segregated special education classrooms were similar to patterns found in typically developing elementary school classes. Their findings support the contention that friendships among adolescents with disabilities show some, but not all of the features of typical adolescent relationships.

Our aim in this study was to provide evidence on what teens with disabilities say about friendships and their own friends, using the adolescents' own ideas and stories, along with ethnographic observations of their peer relationships. Field workers provided an opportunity for the teens to describe their friendships and observed those friendships first-hand. In a study of these same teens' explanatory models of their disability, Daley and Weisner (2003) found that most have an explanatory model that can be quite rich and complex. The authors noted that teens "have a kind of blended, layered sense of self and identity-drawing from and using typical identities and experiences, yet framed within a life of disability" (p. 38). We expected the same kind of complexity for teens' friendship accounts and that teens would describe their friendships in ways that were selectively different from those described in the literature on typically developing friendships, but nonetheless sufficient for analysis and comparison in their own right.

In the present report, we present evidence from a longitudinal study of friendships in adolescents with mild to moderate developmental disabilities; we focused on four questions: How do the teens describe their friendships? How do teens' descriptions fit with the characteristics of friendships described in the literature? What are the relationships between teens' friendship descriptions and gender and functioning level? How do teens' descriptions compare with ethnographic observations of teens and their social relationships?

Method

Participants

Our sample was drawn from a cohort of 102 Euro American families with children who had developmental delays who were recruited into a longitudinal study in 1985–1986, when the children were 3- to 4-years-old: the CHILD Project sample (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989). Each family in our sample had a child who had been judged by a professional or an agency to be developmentally delayed. Children with known genetic abnormalities were excluded from the sample as were children whose delays were associated with either known prenatal alcohol or drug usage or with postnatal neglect or abuse (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1982, 1986). Contact with families, including conversations with parents, child assessments, and questionnaires completed by parents and/or teachers, occurred when the children were ages 3, 7, 11, and 16–18. (Further details concerning the sample, recruitment, and attrition are available in Gallimore, Coots, Weisner, Garnier, and Guthrie, 1996.)

At the start of the most recent follow-up in 2000, we obtained data on 83 families (81% of the original sample). Of these 83 families, 64 still lived in the greater Los Angeles area (76% of our total N at age 16). We randomly sampled 47% of these 64 families to create a group of 30 families for a more detailed ethnographic study. We randomly selected 30 families because we could reasonably do intensive ethnographic research with about 30 families in the Los Angeles area; this group represented nearly half the Los Angeles area families, and we wanted to include the full range of teens, not only those who might have been higher func-

tioning or more willing and/or able to participate in the study. Of these 30 teens, 27 were able to participate in the interviews related to friendship. Two of the 30 adolescents had severe deficits in verbal communication and 1 refused to participate. The mean Stanford-Binet IQ for this group was 75.48 ($SD = 15.99$, range $= 48$ to 105). This is a sample of children with a wide range of developmental disabilities, including 7 with IQs in the average range (89–105). Of these 7, 2 had early speech or motor delays; 3 were diagnosed with learning disabilities; 1 was diagnosed with pervasive developmental delay and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); and 1 had multiple diagnoses, including visual impairment, seizures, and cerebral palsy. Table 1 shows demographic information for the 27 ethnographic sample families for whom we had data on friendship.

Qualitative Methods

Ethnography. Six field workers contacted, secured permission from, and began visiting the 27 families. Each field worker was assigned between 1 and 7 adolescents and their families; they spent a minimum of 10 hours with each teen and family they worked with. Field workers participated in the lives of the adolescents and their families to the greatest extent possible that was appropriate for each situation; but in all cases, they spent considerable time with each teen in his or her home. They also took teens out to eat (a popular excursion); went to their schools, after-school care, and recreational programs; attended birthday parties; went with them to church; and on shopping trips to malls. Through these field-work contacts, and generally "hanging out" with teens, there were many opportunities to observe the teens with their self-described friends and with other peers. These observations were summarized in written field notes entered in the EthnoNotes database system (Lieber, Weisner, & Presley, 2003). The observations on friendship were coded into the EthnoNote domain Relationships with Peers; Friendships, one of 16 major ethnographic domains developed from prior theory, our own prior results, and the literature.

Teen interview. The teens responded to a semistructured interview about different aspects of their lives, including work/school, risky behaviors, friendships, favorite/least favorite activities, and worries. Teens were provided an open-ended opportunity to talk about their experiences and satisfaction with peer relationships. For the current

Table 1. Total and Percentage for Demographic Information for the Ethnographic Sample

Demographic	n	%
Child gender		
Male	15	56
Female	12	44
Child school placement		
Special education	14	52
Regular education	4	15
Combination	9	33
Marital status[a]		
Conjugal family	19	70
Single parent	8	30
Mother's current employment status[b]		
Not working outside home	10	38
Parttime outside home	4	15
Fulltime outside home	12	46
Father's current employment status[b]		
Not working outside home	4	19
Parttime outside home	1	5
Fulltime outside home	16	76
Family's total annual income ($)		
10–19,999	1	4
20–29,999	6	22
30–49,999	7	26
50–74,999	8	29
75–100,000	1	4
Over 100,000	4	15

Note. Sample $N = 27$.
[a]Conjugal family includes married to biological parent, stepparent, or living with a partner. [b]One case for mother is missing; 6 cases for father are missing.

study, teens' responses to three specific issues regarding friendship were analyzed: (a) tell me about your friends, (b) do you have a best friend, and if so, (c) please tell me why this person is your best friend?

Responses to questions about friendship were transcribed and coded for the 11 friendship themes from the research literature as summarized above (similarity, proximity, transcending context, companionship, reciprocity, mutuality, help/support, conflict management, stability, trust/loyalty, and intimacy/disclosure). Each theme was coded

separately for presence or absence, and teens could and did mention more than one theme. Two independent raters (the first two authors) coded the responses, with a 90% agreement between them.

Comparison of ethnographic and interview data. The teens' descriptions of their friendships from the interviews were matched with the field note data in order to examine these two sources of data for discrepancies. Few discrepancies were noted, but we have included some of these in the *Results* section under the relevant themes. The lack of significant discrepancies between the interviews and observations supports the conclusion that the teens' self-reports do indeed reflect their actual experiences with friendship. However, field workers were not able to observe all 27 teens with their friends. Direct data were obtained on 19 (70%) of the teens. For the remaining 8 teens, we did not have direct observations with friends; therefore, we could not analyze discrepancies. For most of these cases, we simply did not have field-work visits scheduled when teens were with friends; these 8 cases are not notably different in their interview reports from the other 19 teens.

Results

Gender, Cognitive Ability, and Friendships

We found few differences between gender and cognitive ability (IQ and Vineland Communication Standard Score) and the mean number of friendship themes mentioned by teens. Girls and boys were not different in the mean number of themes mentioned nor which ones were mentioned. We divided IQ and Vineland scores into three groups of 9 from highest to lowest scores in order to compare friendship themes and cognitive ability. Higher IQ teens gave a mean of 4.8 themes; middle third, 3.9; and the lowest third, 3.7. Paired *t* tests showed no significant differences among the three groups. However, teens with the lowest Vineland Communication scores mentioned significantly fewer themes (low = 2.9, moderate = 4.9, and high = 4.5) than did teens with either moderate, $t = -3.02$, $p = .007$, or high, $t = -2.68$, $p = .017$, scores.

How Do Teens With Disabilities Describe Their Friendships?

We analyzed teens' descriptions of their friendships, using the same 11 themes we identified in the literature. Although all 11 themes were recognizable in at least some of the teens' conversations, clear patterns of emphasis emerged (e.g., the teens' unique use of proximity and stability), and one new theme was found (attractive qualities). The mean number of themes expressed per teen was 4.2 and the total number of themes ranged from 1 to 7. Table 2 displays the themes by frequency of occurrence. The themes are discussed in order of frequency of occurrence, from most frequent to least frequently mentioned.

"To do something together." Companionship is the major theme of friendship. The feature most frequently mentioned ($n = 22$, 81%) by the teens in

Table 2. Frequency of Friendship Themes in Descending Order for Descriptions of Best Friend by Adolescents With Disabilities ($N = 27$)

Theme (Example)	n	%
Companionship (Did things with each other)	22	81
Transcend context (Activities in more than one location)	15	56
Similarity (Shared traits or interests)	13	48
Stability (Maintain friendship over time)	12	45
Proximity (Physically near each other)	10	37
Attractive qualities (Positive traits)	8	30
Intimacy/Disclosure (Share personal information)	8	30
Help/Support/Acceptance (To be included with or get support from others)	6	22
Reciprocity (To both give and receive support)	6	22
Trust/Loyalty (Not betray by leaving or telling secrets)	6	22
Mutuality (Choosing each other as friends)	5	19
Conflict management (To work out arguments between each other)	3	11

Note. Teens could mention more than one theme; mean number of themes expressed per teen was 4.2; total number of themes ranged from 1 to 7.

describing their friendships was the idea of companionship. They saw a friend as someone to be around and do things with. For example, Claire, who has attended noninclusive (special day) classes since elementary school, only sees her best friend at school. She nominated this classmate because they "Eat lunch. Color." She also says that a friend is someone you "give high five to." At school, Claire was observed eating lunch with this friend, as well as several other students from the same special education class. These students sat together at a table in the middle of a large group of both regular and special education students. Although there was little verbal interaction, they giggled at each other's nonverbal reactions to their fellow students' antics. Simply being with someone else to share activities is enough for her to happily tell the field-worker that she has "lots" of friends.

We go to school, go to the mall, the movies, or just hang out: The ability to transcend contexts. Making friends in one context and being able to extend the friendship to another is considered important in creating a deeper relationship with a friend. By adolescence, typically developing teens are able to do this easily by walking to someone's house, riding a bike, or driving somewhere. Over half of our teens ($n = 15$, 56%) talked about seeing their friends in more than one context. Many times, it was a friend that the teen met through the family or at school and then saw at another location, such as a church youth group, home, or Special Olympics. For example, Cindy's best friend lived across the street, but she also saw her at school, although this friend did not attend Cindy's special day class. They went to the movies together occasionally. Parents usually were heavily involved in facilitating these activities. Whereas typically developing teens transcend context with little parental supervision (indeed, usually seek out such situations), our teens relied on their parents to give them rides and, in some cases, set up the meeting. (Personal mobility was not a major issue in this sample, as there were only 3 teens with limited mobility among the 27 teens in the study: 2 teens used wheelchairs, 1 teen used a walker.) For example, Rich has a "movie date" every other week with a friend he met through a social club for adolescents and young adults with disabilities. Rich's mother brought him to the social club and made the friend through another mom; the mothers set up the day, time, and movie to see. Due to Rich's expressive language problems and shy-

ness he probably would not have been able to do this otherwise. Rich reported mixed feelings about his friendships. Although he enjoyed seeing friends both at his private school for students with moderate to severe learning disabilities and through his social club, he also admitted that he "needs some more friends." Only one teen who mentioned transcending contexts did not actually appear to do so in our ethnographic observations. Alex said he went to movies with his friend from a school Christian club, but he could not give details of when or what movies, and his mother told the field worker that he did not hang out with friends outside of school, and the field worker was unable to observe Alex outside his home setting.

Of the 15 teens who did mention transcending context, ethnographic observations documented at least 13 (48%) for whom this was the reality. For example, Claire only saw her friends during school, where she showed more positive affect and was much more animated than at home. When Jared talked about his best friend, who attended the same special day classes and used to live across the street, he said, "He's in another group home. I've tried to call him but no luck. Don't know if he's my best friend anymore because I haven't seen him in a while." Because neither he nor his friend were mobile and neither had parents that were able to drive them to see each other, the friendship had waned. However, the 2 other teens in the sample with mobility challenges, Regina and Daisy, were able to see their friends in multiple contexts, such as football games and bowling leagues, with transportation provided by parents.

"He acts a little weird sometimes, just like me." Similarity in personality and activities. For 48% ($n = 13$) of the teens, similarities in personality and activities were salient features of a good friendship. Jacob had a great time with his best friend because they both liked to talk about girls, Brittany Spears, INSYNC, and Power Rangers. Jacob and his friend attended the same noninclusive class for students with academic and behavioral challenges. Greg, who attended regular education classes and had mild learning disabilities, thought that a best friend should be someone "who has the same ideas as I have. I guess in a friend I like to see me but a little bit different."

"He was in my class since kindergarten." Stability and proximity in making and maintaining friendships. Twelve of the teens (45%) found stability to be a

highly salient feature of friendship. Although knowing a person for a long time is not an unusual means for defining friendship, the use of long-term physical proximity (usually in special education classrooms) in the absence of other significant features of friendship would not be a defining feature of friendship among typically developing teens. Field-workers observed these friendships in classrooms, recreation centers, and after-school care programs, primarily among the teens with significant communication deficits.

The notion that one must be in physical proximity to others in order to make friends also could be described as an implicit, perhaps taken-for-granted, condition of friendship among typically developing adolescents. Proximity, however, was not taken for granted by the teens with disabilities. It was mentioned by 10 teens (37%) as a reason why they chose the friend they did. Jake, who had moderate developmental delays and attended a Special Day Class, nominated his best friend because he "know(s) him from the park." Jake's "park" is a weekly social club for youths with disabilities sponsored by the local Parks and Recreation Department. The two young men did not interact; they were simply near each other during crafts and sports activities. That degree of proximity was enough to make him consider the boy a friend. In fact, at least 4 of the teens appeared to use proximity, in conjunction with stability, as the primary defining features of their friendships. Rich, for example, nominated a girl who had been in his special education classes for many years as his best friend. Rich's field-worker went to his school and described their interaction: "He never did say anything to her, but I think he had more eye contact with her than just about anyone." He had just been near her often, and Rich believed that a best friend was equivalent to "a long time friend."

"He's crazy, he's like rock 'n roll." Friends have attractive qualities. The idea that friends have qualities that you enjoy or admire is not explicitly mentioned in the literature on friendships, although it is implicit in many features of friendship. However, there were 8 teens who explicitly talked about this. For example, when Greg talked about why he nominated his best friend, he described characteristics he admired in him: "He's a cool guy. Generally calm and complacent. He tries to bring in a different point of view and a lot of discussion." Claire liked her best friend because he was a "nice guy." Maggie and Jenna,

both in special day classes, focused on the fact that their best friends were funny and made them laugh.

"We share the same ideas and thoughts, we believe in telepathy." Intimacy and disclosure. A relatively small number of teens emphasized feeling close to their best friend and often compared it to being a family, such as "they treat me like I'm part of their family" and "I call him my brother because we've been through so much stuff together." Jerry, who attended regular classes at a continuation high school, focused on intimacy and disclosure: "I would tell them everything." Jerry and his friends participated in an informal, backyard wrestling group, and Jerry's satisfaction with this situation was clear from his comment, "It's fun, they're really cool." This theme, however, was mentioned less than expected, given its emphasis in the literature: only 30% ($n = 8$) of the teens nominated their best friend because they were closer to them than anybody else.

"They stick up for me. If they know someone hates me, they're gonna all stand up for me." The role of help, emotional/instrumental support, and acceptance. Regina, who had an aide attending her regular education classes with her, felt accepted by her friends when "they respect me for who I am" and received instrumental support from her friends when they lifted her out of her wheelchair and carried her upstairs to choir practice. Shannon attended a combination of resource and regular education classes at her high school. Her parents disapproved of her peer network, "the druggies," as Shannon called them. Shannon maintained that they were good friends because they accepted her for who she was and because of the support they gave her. When she got picked on and teased for being slow and not keeping up, her "druggie" friends would "stand up" for her.

Twenty-two percent ($n = 6$) of the teens felt that support was a key component in friendship. Daisy said it well: "She comforts me when something goes wrong." Daisy had a mix of special education and regular education friends at her high school, where she attended a special day class for students with physical and learning disabilities, and the friend who comforted her attended the same special classes from elementary school through high school.

"A friend is someone who will listen to you whining about your problems before they start whining about theirs." The importance of reciprocity and mutuality. The concepts of reciprocity and mutuality are fre-

quently mentioned in the literature on the typically developing population as key components of friendship. A few of our teens also expressed the importance of these ideas within their definitions. For instance, the clearest mention of mutuality was "someone who I like hanging out with and who likes hanging out with me." However, descriptions of mutuality were not that frequent among the teens. Only 5 mentioned ideas of mutuality, and 6 talked about a reciprocal relationship. Josie, describing a long-term friend from her special day classes, gave one of the few examples of reciprocity, "When she had a problem, I talk to her about it, and when I have problems, she'll hug me and take care of me."

However, mutuality is salient because it is often noted as absent in actual practice; 7 other teens specifically mentioned the absence of mutuality in their attempts to have a friend. They talked about putting in time to contact and go out with friends and not getting a response. This most often occurred when a teen was trying to maintain a friendship with a typically developing peer. Josie mentioned another set of friends that she had a hard time maintaining contact with, telling the field-worker:

> They say, oh, I haven't seen you in a while, let's do this. I go to wherever they say, and they don't come. I'm like—Mom, pick me up, this is ridiculous. So I'm like, just forget it. I'm not gonna go.

Daisy nominated a peer who was paired up with her through a social program called Best Buddies, which is a school-based program pairing typically developing teens and teens with disabilities for social interaction. After mentioning all the positive things within the relationship she added, "She's not in Best Buddies anymore. She didn't even tell me she was dropping out."

"Never lie to each other, never beat on each other." Conflict management, loyalty, and trust. Research and common experience, of course, suggest that friends will disagree and get into arguments at some point (Bukowski et al., 1996b). What partially determines whether the friendship will survive is the ability to manage conflicts. However, only 3 teens mentioned working through disagreements and that being able to do so was a major part of their friendship. Josie talked about how conflict management helped her maintain a long-lasting friendship, "We know about each other really well, and we barely fight. Sometimes we will, but that was when we were immature." Conflict management was also important in Jay's

friendship. Jay had been in and out of special education classes at several schools, both for learning and behavioral problems. He and his friend met in first grade when the friend "damn near broke my nose." When the boy came to apologize, Jay said, "Let's be friends." Since then they had been completely loyal and trusting of each other. In fact, he said, "We've been there [for each other]—me and him have been through hell and back." Overall, though, loyalty and trust were seldom mentioned in the interviews (22% of the teens), although most normative developmental descriptions of adolescent friendship include these as among the most salient features.

Teens' spontaneous remarks. We also heard from many of the teens about how satisfied they were with their friendships in our conversations. When teens described their friendship experiences, at least 17 (63%) made spontaneous positive comments, such as "I have a lot of good friends" or "We do lots of things. It's going well." A few others (7 or 23%) evidenced mixed feelings by including among their positive comments a desire for more friends, but only one teen felt he did not have any friends at all. Our ethnographic observations of teens in their everyday lives showed frequent examples of shared positive affect and mutual enjoyment among the teens and the friends they nominated. Teens overall told us and showed us they were satisfied with the friendships they did have, using their criteria of companionship, transcending context, stability, proximity, and similarity.

Discussion

In summary, the teens' concepts of friendship appeared to focus primarily on companionship, including being able to engage in activities with peers in a variety of contexts, having peers to be with who shared similarities with them, and who were available on a long-term basis. Teens also mentioned sheer proximity and being in a group together as a kind of friendship, which is not part of the general notion of friendship. Here, we see the strengths and the puzzles of taking the teens' points of view about friendships seriously. Mere long-time proximity does not fit the standard research definitions nor our normative United States cultural models of "friendship." Yet, over a fourth of our teens experienced proximity with others as important to them—at or near the top of their list—in thinking about friends.

These teens' stories about friends make use of many of the definitions of friendship recognized in our culture and by researchers. Their definitions of a friend, however, were shaped by their disabilities and contexts. The teens' criteria of companionship, stability/proximity, and attractive qualities make sense given their circumstances and are fairly clear and specific as to what counts for them as satisfying friends. The teens' own friendship model put into everyday practice, which we were able to see through our ethnographic observations of most teens' everyday lives, in fact, largely reflected their actual experiences with peers in their daily routine.

The fact that many of the teens mentioned a median of four features of friendship leads us to conclude that most of these teens have simpler notions of what constitutes a satisfying friendship than do typically developing teens in United States society and that companionship, similarity, and stability/proximity are very important to the teens. Although these features are indeed mentioned in the research literature, they represent only a relatively small portion of the generally accepted definition of *friendship*. In fact, such friendships are considered in the developmental literature to be less "mature" than friendships characterized by reciprocity, loyalty, support, disclosure, and conflict management (Siperstein, Leffert, & Wenz-Gross, 1997). Doing things together and liking one another are normatively developmentally early expectations of friendship; our teens continued to use these features to define friendship.

Both the teens' reports and our ethnographic observations indicated that the large majority of the teens in our study did indeed have friendships and were socially engaged in ways that they themselves found satisfying and, in fact, wanted more of. Other researchers have found this to be true for higher functioning teens with disabilities (Orsmond, Krauss, & Seltzer, 2004), but we found this true for the lower functioning adolescents in our sample too. However, we also found that lower functioning teens were somewhat more likely to say they were satisfied with their friends and mentioned fewer friendship themes than did higher functioning teens. Saying that one has friends—"sure I do" several teens said—is itself a socially desirable cloak of competence (Edgerton, Bollinger, & Herr, 1984) that everyone needs to have.

Our findings regarding friendship themes and actual friendships reported by teens were true for those in both more and less inclusive school en-vironments. Most of the teens in our study were, in fact, in mixed school situations, with the majority of their time spent in separate special education classes with some inclusive periods. Therefore, we were unable to conduct meaningful comparisons of classroom placement. Our ethnographic evidence suggests that classroom context did play a role in teens' reports of friendships because those teens in less inclusive classes tended to mention fewer themes but also to describe their friendships in more positive terms. At the same time, these same teens were more likely to be lower functioning in terms of IQ/communication skills. Sorting out the effects of classroom context and functioning level on teen friendship experiences is an important topic for further research.

Among the teens observed in our sample, functioning levels were not the primary determinant of their satisfaction with friends. In almost all the 19 cases where we saw the teens with peers, across all levels of functioning, the field-workers saw the teens engaging in positive social interactions with their nominated friends. Teens liked satisfying companionships and that, indeed, was what the field-workers frequently observed, especially among the teens in noninclusive special education classrooms. These friendships certainly are not as varied and intense as those of typically developing youth, and some teens said they would like more. Guided help by adults usually was necessary to facilitate friendships in or out of school or program settings. However, within the available contexts of school, programs, and family supports, teens' reports of friendship were borne out in behavior.

One final observation suggested by our longitudinal findings is still quite preliminary, but provocative. In examining the changes that have occurred and are occurring among our teens' friendships in adolescence, there is some indication that friendships between peers with developmental disabilities are more stable, proximally defined and companionate than friendships between teens with developmental disabilities and typically developing peers. The most stable friendships seemed to be among peers who may well have been less skillful socially, but who had gone through the same special education classes together, sometimes for many years. This fits with the teens' own emphasis on proximity and stability in their friendships.

We wonder, as these teens leave the school setting, as well as transition out of other programs

they are in outside school, what will happen with such friendships, which have been so strongly supported by the consistency in their school and program environments. We have anecdotal evidence from several sources, for example, teens from our sample who have graduated, anecdotes from parent support groups, and evidence from a similar sample of youth in their early 20s (Keogh, Bernheimer, & Guthrie, 2004) suggesting that it may be more difficult for these teens to maintain contact with existing friends or find peers with whom to establish friendships once high school, associated programs, and family supports end or become less available and stable. As the teens transition to young adulthood, we, in fact, are seeing some negative changes in friendships, with teens expressing decreased satisfaction. If these patterns hold, there is clear evidence that what these teens need to sustain the kinds of friendships that they experience now is greater continuity of school-like and other community settings that scaffold companionship and proximity relationships for teens, beginning in and continuing after high school. Friendship supports such as these obviously are very difficult to sustain. Providing socially appropriate contexts outside the home, whether with people who do or do not have developmental disabilities, in more inclusive settings or less, clearly will support teens' own goals for friendships that offer proximity, stability, and shared companionship.

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