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Friendship Characteristics of Children with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities: Qualitative Evidence from Video Data

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Abstract

Although most children establish friendships by pre-school age, children with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) often experience difficulties doing so. The literature identifies several characteristics associated with friendships of typically developing children that describe the ways children form and maintain friendships. It is unclear whether these characteristics describe friendships of children with IDD. This secondary analysis of 24 hours of video data from a larger study uses thematic content analysis to explore friendship characteristics of nine children (9-12 years) with IDD based on their own perspectives. Findings support the relevance of these characteristics to the children's friendships, and highlight contextual features influencing development and maintenance of their friendships.

Social scientists have found it difficult to define the term friendship largely because the term is not just a categorical label for social position, but also a term signifying something about the nature (i.e., quality and character) of the social relationship (Fehr, 1996). Friendship represents a central concept heavily studied throughout the childhood and adolescent years, in part, because it creates valuable opportunities to learn and practice skills that are essential to children's social, cognitive, communicative, and emotional development (Guralnick et al., 2007; Harris, 2006). Friendships, and the experiences of it, constitute an important area of research due to their impact on development well into adulthood (e.g., self-esteem and social adjustment) (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1993). A growing body of evidence also suggests that friendship represents a strong determinant of individual health (Achat et al., 1998; Parker & Asher, 1993) and can enhance quality of life (Renwick & Fudge Schormans, 2011; Renwick, Fudge Schormans, & Zekovic, 2003).

There have been a number of research studies investigating aspects of friendships among typically developing (TD) children (Webster & Carter, 2010). Much of this research highlights friendship or peer relationships as social interactions involving closeness, sharing, and mutual enjoyment (Tipton, Christensen, & Blacher, 2013; Webster & Carter, 2010). Research on the friendships of typically developing (TD) children identifies a number of commonly associated friendship characteristics, such as intimacy, affection, reciprocity, similarity, proximity, transcendence of context, companionship, mutuality, support, trust/loyalty, conflict management, and stability (Berndt, 1996; Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Buysee, Goldman & Skinner, 2002; Fehr, 1996; Freeman & Kasari, 1993; Grenot-Scheyer et al.,1998 Haselager, Hartup, van Lieshout, & Riksen-Walraven, 1998; Matheson, Olsen & Weisner, 2007; Parker & Asher, 1993; Rubin, Fredstrom, & Bowker, 2008; Turnbull, Blue-Banning & Periera, 2000). However, research in the area has not focused on the experience of friendship and friendship characteristics for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This is a key area of interest for a number of reasons. As previously mentioned, friendship plays a pivotal role in the developmental process of children, and their transitions from childhood to adulthood. Research supports the notion that friendship represents a milestone in the early years of a child's development, and that friendship can be observed as early as toddlerhood (Howes, 1996). In fact, by the time young children reach preschool age, most have established relationships with their peers, and are able to form meaningful friendships (Guralick, 1999). Research has shown that a lack of friendships can create deficits in children's early learning achievements, and increase feelings of anxiety, depression and social withdrawal (Berndt 2004). There is evidence to support an increased level of vulnerability for children with disabilities relating to peers. Specifically, compared to TD children, there are some sub-groups of children with developmental delays, behavioural problems, and disabilities, who are at higher risk for developing poor peer relationships (Kemple, 2004), including children with IDD. Although a number of issues impacting the development of friendships for children with IDD have been noted in the literature, much of the attention has focused on these children's varying degrees of ability (Freeman & Kasari, 1998; Odom, Zercher, Marquart, Sandall, & Brown, 2006), rather than on the friendships themselves. Studies have shown that etiology and severity of a child's disability can impact friendship formation (Meyer & Ostrosky, 2013). It has been found that children whose disabilities affected their prosocial behaviours were more often rejected by classroom peers when compared with children whose disabilities did not significantly impact their social development (Odom et al., 2006). For children with IDD, difficulty forming friendships has been attributed to several factors including: slower development in motor, perceptual, cognitive, language, and communicative skills; delayed social skills; and a lack of social competence (Freeman & Kasari, 1998; Harris, 2006; Serafica, 1990). Furthermore, development of friendship theories (e.g., about how friendships are formed and maintained) has given little attention to this population.

In the last few decades, a number of studies have focused on exploring the friendships of children with disabilities. However a large number have been based on proxy reports, rather than the perspectives of these children themselves (Rubin et al., 2008). Although proxy reports can provide useful information (Ronen, Streiner, & Rosenbaum, 2003), they do not permit a direct understanding of children's experiences and meanings they attach to friendship. Relying solely on proxy reports has several disadvantages including over-identification of mutual friendships and overestimation of the number of friends (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). Incongruent information obtained from parental reports tend to result from implied or assumed criteria for friendship, as well as differing perspectives between parents and their children about what a particular phenomenon, such as what friendship actually means, and/or how it is defined by parent and child (Buysee, 1993; Jozefiak, Larsson, Wichstrom, Wallander, J., & Mattejat, 2010). The accuracy of parental reports may also be influenced by how often children's daily activities are monitored (Reid, Landesman, Treder, & Jaccard 1989).

More sources of information are needed to better understand their friendship experiences (Bukowski et al., 1996; Reid et al., 1989). While there is growing consensus that eliciting the voices of children with IDD is necessary to more fully understand their experiences of friendship (Bukowski et al., 1996; Meyer & Ostrosky, 2013; Reid et al., 1989), current literature provides little knowledge about the self-reported experiences of friendship for these children (Renwick & Fudge Schormans, 2006). A number of barriers to eliciting the voices of children with IDD have been noted (e.g., the presence of cognitive and/or speech impairments, increased time and effort to support participation) (McLarty & Gibson, 2000), including the perception that they are less competent communicators and, as such, their perspectives can be idiosyncratic and their capacities for describing relationships limited (Bukowski et al., 1996; Curtin, 2001). There are a number of examples of studies that have elicited the voices of these children (McLarty & Gibson, 2000; Reid et al., 1989; Renwick & Fudge

Schormans, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2000), though little research has explored the features of their friendships to determine whether they are similar to those of observed among TD children.

Capturing lived experiences of friendship for children with IDD addresses two prominent gaps in the literature: the inadequate representation of children with IDD as informants and active participants in research (McLarty & Gibson, 2000, Meyer & Ostrosky 2013), and limited knowledge about similarities and/or dissimilarities in the friendship experiences of children with IDD contrasted with TD peers. Accessing the voices of children with IDD about their friendship experiences would contribute to a richer understanding of their friendships as well as potentially informing intervention approaches aimed at addressing social isolation and promoting social inclusion and engagement.

The purpose of this qualitative secondary analysis was to examine the friendship experiences of children with IDD in order to explore whether characteristics of friendship identified in the literature for TD children are also evident in friendships of children with IDD. Though it has been suggested that the friendships of children with disabilities differ from those of TD children (Howes, 1983; Webster & Carter, 2007), it has also been argued that current knowledge about the friendship patterns of TD children can provide a template for evaluating the quality and friendship patterns of children with disabilities (Grenot-Scheyer, Staub, Peck, & Schwartz, 1998), such as those with IDD. The current research study analyzed video data from a larger study (described below). A number of themes emerged from the larger study including the importance of social networks, including friendships, in contributing to quality of life for children with IDD (Renwick & Fudge Schormans, 2011).

Methods

The Larger Study

Participant Characteristics: Selection

The study is a secondary analysis of a portion of video data from a larger study examining perspectives of children with IDD about their own quality of life. Ethics approval for the procedures and materials was obtained from the University of Toronto. The study investigated quality of life, including the importance of peer relationships, for children with IDD (9–12 years), using video-graphic methods (described below).

The nine participants in the larger study were recruited through community organizations serving the IDD population within a large metropolitan area in the province of Ontario, Canada. Participants were speaking and non-speaking children with IDD, aged 9–12 years (see Table 1), receiving, waiting, or eligible for developmental services, and willing to participate in one initial meeting, as well as three separately video-recorded interview sessions.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Child's Pseudonym	*Age (in years)*	*Gender*	*Diagnosis*	*Speaking/ Non-speaking*
Sarah	11	F	Cerebral Palsy	Speaking
Todd	10	M	Down Syndrome	Speaking
Mary	11	F	Autism	Speaking
Chris	11	M	Global Delay	Non-Speaking
John	12	M	Autism	Speaking
Chase	11	M	Intellectual Disability	Speaking
Reid	12	M	Asperger Syndrome	Speaking
Brian	10	M	Autism	Non-Speaking
Neil	10	M	Autism	Non-Speaking

Data Collection

Friendships

Video data provide rich, complex, multimodal data. Specifically, its multiple modes include sounds, images, spoken words (text), actions, non-verbal communication and emotional content. As such, it also allows for the inclusion of non-speaking participants.

Each participant and her/his parent took part in the initial meeting. Then each child participated in three separate videotaped sessions (Sessions A, B, and C), ranging from 45 to 90 minutes each. The three videotaped sessions differed on the basis of position and control of a camera, degree of interview structure, and physical setting. Session A included only the child (with parent nearby), the interviewer, and the videographer. Because participant-selected activities and settings in sessions B and C were located in the community (e.g., at school, in neighborhood, swimming or music lessons), others were often present (e.g., siblings, friends, fellow students, parents, and teachers).

During the initial meeting, the research purpose and methods were reviewed, informed consent (for parent) and assent (for child) were obtained, and socio-demographic information was collected (from participant and parent). In Session A, a video camera was positioned on a tripod while the interviewer posed semi-structured questions and probes pertaining to quality of life – *people, places and things that made life good and not so good* – to the child, in the child's home (samples of questions and probes appear in Appendix 1). Responses consisted of verbal answers as well as demonstrating, pointing, and other forms of non-verbal communication that allowed non-speaking children to participate. The child and parent were then provided information about the questions and format for the next session so that the child could choose typical community settings and activities to engage in, as well as any other people who would be included in the next session. In Session B, the videographer recorded each child's engagement in self-selected activities in one or two community settings, often with others whom the child chose, while the interviewer posed the same questions and probes (as in Session A), as needed. This format allowed the child to show, through words and/or actions and interactions with others, the people, places and things that made her/his life good and not so good. At the end of the session, the interviewer discussed the format and instructions for the next session with the child and parent, so that the child could again plan and make choices about it. In Session C, the child directed the filming; that is, selected what was going to be filmed (guided by the same interview questions noted above), who would be present, and the community settings and activities to be filmed. The child also had the choice of videotaping some or all of the session her/himself, with assistance from the videographer when requested. Participants who were unable to physically hold and manoeuvre the camera verbally or non-verbally directed filming by the videographer.

Secondary Analysis

For this secondary analysis study of friendships of children with IDD, video data for all nine participants (24 hours of footage) was thoroughly reviewed twice and portions were reviewed repeatedly to determine their relevance to the study purpose. The video data were analyzed *as a whole,* such that its multiple modes (see above) were analyzed together rather than separately. Video footage that was not relevant to the purpose of the current study was not included in the analysis. Additional data were gathered in the form of the first author's written field notes recorded during her viewing and analysis of the video footage. These field notes included systematically recorded information about important examples from the video footage and observations of video content that provided supporting evidence for characteristics of friendship and any important contextual considerations.

Eleven common characteristics of friendship (e.g., proximity, similarity, mutuality) for TD children identified from the literature were used to create a coding scheme with corresponding definitions for each of the characteristics. This coding scheme guided the thematic content analysis (Cresswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), including identification of the presence and/or absence of each characteristic and supporting evidence form the video footage (see Table 2). A constant comparative method (Cresswell, 2013) was used to analyze the data within and across each child's three videotaped sessions, as well as across all sessions for all nine children.

Results

Non-identifying descriptive information about the nine participants appears in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of participants, as well as family and friends who participated in the recorded video sessions.

Data analysis revealed evidence of multiple friendship characteristics among the participants, as well as several contextual facilitators and challenges that influenced the friendship experience of children with IDD. However, here the focus is on three of the strongest and most common friendship characteristics identified among participants: *proximity, similarity and transcendence of context*. These three friendship characteristics and several aspects of context important for understanding the findings are described below, supported by participants' verbatim quotations and relevant observations concerning the video data (e.g., non-verbal communication, interactions, actions, emotional tone from the video footage). Quotations are documented using the following conventions: three dots (…) indicate missing words and square brackets [ ] denote inserted information to make meaning clearer.

The Characteristics of Friendship

Proximity

Studies have found that children typically form relationships with others who are socially proximate (i.e., similar in demographic or behavioral characteristics) and spatially proximate (close in physical space) (Neil, Neil, & Capella, 2014). For the purpose of this study, proximity has been defined as spatial proximity in which children are observed spending time together or engaged in discussions about spending time with peers within a particular setting or group of settings. Various settings are described by participants and noted to create opportunities to interact (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Staub, 1998), within a certain distance of one another; typically 3 to 6 feet while spending time together (Schmidt & Bagwell, 2013). In that we were concerned that this research reflects the perceptions of children with IDD, it was important to rely on their identification of children who were their friends. Proximity was identified among six of the nine participants. In the video clips from sessions B & C, participants were observed participating in friendships with peers from the same neighbourhood or school, as well as with children involved in the same extracurricular activities (e.g., swimming class).

Sarah reported that several of her friendships developed during shared activities such as choir practice, swim class, and in the classroom. When asked about friends who attended her birthday party, Sarah indicated, *"some of them are my cousins…"* and added that others at the party were her friends from school. Todd also revealed the recent development of a friendship with a child who also attended the same school. In some instances, the term "my other friend" was used to differentiate friendships developed in a school setting from those initiated during extracurricular and non-school-related activities. Proximity was also observed in the footage of interactions of both nonverbal participants and their same-age peers. For example, Chris was seen interacting with children playing on the same playground, and reading books side-by-side other children in the library. Brian's footage showed him playing basketball with his brother and friends from their neighborhood. The relationship between absence of proximity and termination of friendship was also evident. For example, Mary said that she was no longer friends with Judy because Judy had relocated to another school as they had lost contact.

Similarity

This aspect of friendship refers to the presence of shared characteristics that facilitate interaction between two individuals based on their similarities in background (e.g., race, age, gender, interests, etc.) (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Matheson et al., 2007). Similarity is believed to play a vital role in establishing initial friendship connections (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Berndt, 1982). For seven participants, similarity was a feature captured through self-directed discussions about shared activities and interests. For instance, Todd's footage showed him playing a similar games with a child identified as a friend; indicating their shared or common interest. Chase recounted how both he and his friend had different video game systems. Therefore, he often visited his friend's house to play the video game, "Xbox," and his friend would often visit Chase's house to play using his video game system, "Play Station." During another interview session, Sarah listed the names of several friends who were involved in the same extracurricular activities as she was, such as, choir, stretch class, and swimming class.

The participants did not explicitly mention characteristics such as gender or race in relation to similarity, but disability was briefly discussed. Two of the nine participants, either alluded to friendships with other children with disabilities or were observed at some point in time interacting with peers with a disability; particularly those participants who were noted to be in segregated classrooms. More than fifty percent of the participants were observed in video footage interacting with non-disabled peers, or describing their friendships with non-disabled peers. One participant, Sarah openly discussed feeling different because of her disability, and reported that sometimes she would let her non-disabled friends know what she needs in order to feel included. Sarah said *"sometimes I'm talking with my friends…and I'm sort of like, OK, I want to be included in this and stuff."* She went on to indicate that she tells her non-disabled friends when she has specific needs related to her disability. However, for many of the participants, similarity characteristics largely focused on closeness in age or grade in school and the presence of common interests (i.e., games or hobbies). The disability characteristics were not used by any of the participants as a rationale for friendship or as a rationale for similarity that lead to the development of a friendship. Instead, participants focused on common interest, shared locations (i.e., school), and experiences.

Transcendence of Context

This characteristic captures the experience of friendship with a friend across a variety of settings, including, but not limited to, the setting in which the friendship initially began (Asher, Parker & Walker, 1996). Given the complex nature of transcendence, it was not a feature explicitly described by participants in this study. However, it was captured through observations of specific segments of the video data. For the majority of participants, transcendence of context occurred by way of activities such as sleepovers, birthday parties, and visits to one another's homes with the same friend or friends. For instance, Mary reported…*"sometimes they [my friends] come over to my house, and I go over to their house. I go to her [friend, Heather's] house more often, and Kerry [another friend] and I go to her house for birthdays."* Reid talked about also spending time with his friends from school during summer vacation at the yacht club. Chase reported playing video games with his friends at school and after school in different settings. For a few of the participants, telephone conversations and e-mails outside of school and personal photographs (of themselves with their friends) were shared with the interviewer and video recorded and/or shown or recounted by the child in the video footage. These were also indicators of transcendence of context. For example: Interviewer: *"Do you ever call your friends on the phone? …* Sarah: *"yeah, and well sometimes my friends call me*." In her video footage, Sarah was also seen showing photos of herself with several friends from her recent birthday party as she named and talked about each, indicating those who attended her school, those who participated in various extracurricular activities with her, and those who did both. Brian, a non-verbal participant was observed playing with neighborhood children outside, and his parent reported that he often spend time with his older brother's friends from school.

Transcendence of context was noted as carryover of one's friendship beyond the initial place in which the relationship began. This finding suggests that other characteristics such as reciprocity and mutual liking may be present. However, both of these friendship characteristics were difficult to capture due to the nature of the study.

Emergent Contextual Considerations

A number of facilitating and constraining influences also emerged from the thematic analysis of the video footage that appears to impact the friendship experiences of children with IDD. These additional findings help to contextualize the findings concerning the three friendship characteristics revealed here. The three most noteworthy facilitating influences were: parental support, each child's repertoire of activities, and accessibility. For several participants, parental support often involved chauffeuring children between school and extracurricular activities, and modelling socially appropriately behaviours. For example, Neil's mother was observed introducing him to other children in the library. The footage showed Neil's mother providing him with the appropriate social cues to initiate an interaction with peers ["Say hello," "What is your name?"]. Parents were also seen assisting their children (participants) to organize play dates, and parties that supported their friendships. Chase reported that he had made a friend in Detroit who recently moved to Chase's home city. When the interviewer asked whether the two had recently spent time together, Chase's mother interjected with *"not yet, but I'll organize it for them."* Many parents often encouraged and supported their children's participation in a variety of activities. Indicators of this form of support which was reported or shown in the footage included helping participants to get access to adaptive aids, demonstrating and expressing positive attitudes about participants' capabilities, as well as informing children and families in the neighborhood about the nature of their child's disability. For example, Brian's mother indicated that she often took the time to explain to families and children in the neighbourhood details about her son's disability to ensure that those around him were well-informed and could understand his needs. The parental role in facilitating friendship development also appeared to shift depending on whether participants were speaking or non-speaking. Parents of non-speaking participants were often observed initiating interaction between their children and peers, while verbal participants were noted to initiate contact independently but still required assistance to maintain or create opportunities for transcendence of context.

The data also indicated several constraints that appeared to negatively influence the friendship experiences of this group of children, such as, limited accessibility and disability characteristics. For instance, one participant discussed her experience of exclusion when inaccessible transportation and limited access to modified resources are available. Sarah, who has an IDD and also uses a wheelchair due to a mobility-related disability, reported…*"We go on the subway for field trips …."* However, later Sarah explains: *"Well my teacher…* [and] *I don't go on the same subway as them* [friends and classmates] *because its…*[subway station] *is not accessible* [to wheel chair users], *and they take* [one subway station]*…and I take* [a different, accessible subway station]." Although, none of the participants directly identified their disabilities as a hindrance to friendship development, some participants mentioned that disability affected ways in which they participated or were included in activities with non-disabled peers. For example, Sarah talked about accessing a modified toboggan during winter months, and Brian's parents purchased a three-wheeled bicycle that would allow him to ride outside with his brother. Furthermore, the disability characteristics of participants also played a role in the research such that the data for non-speaking children (e.g., interactions with their friends shown in the video footage) were sometimes more challenging to interpret than the data for the speaking participants.

Discussion

This qualitative secondary analysis explored friendship experiences of children with IDD to explore whether friendship characteristics associated with TD children are similar and/or dissimilar to those of children with IDD. The findings are significant in that they suggest that the friendships of children with IDD exhibit some of the same characteristics identified in friendships of TD children. Although not all eleven friendship characteristics were identified among each of the nine participants, there was evidence supporting all eleven characteristics in the data. Three of these characteristics (i.e., proximity, similarity, transcendence of context) for which there is strongest supporting evidence, are highlighted. As discussed in previous friendship literature, these three features appeared to be interlinked (Matheson et al., 2007), as children involved in the same activities were also noted to share similar interests, thus creating opportunities to routinely interact with their peers.The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies reporting that the friendships of children with other disabilities do include many of the same qualities found in the friendships of TD children such as positive affection, enjoyment, laughing, and ability to share with others (Buysse, 1993; Buysse, Goldman, West, & Hollingsworth, 2008; Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009).

Although, many of the participants developed friendships with children of the same age, or within the same classroom, extracurricular, or non-school activity, disability was not highlighted as a feature of similarity. Many participants talked about, and/or were observed in the video footage to have non-disabled friends, and issues related to their disability characteristics were supported by way of modified resources, such that they could engage in activities with their friends. Although it is not possible in this study to determine whether this aspect of friendship with non-disabled peers changes with age, or becomes a more defining characteristic during the pre-teen or adolescent years, the data suggest that for this group of children it did not appear to be a barrier or defining feature of their friendships. It should also be noted that many of the parents in this study, were strong advocates for their children and had access to the resources that allowed them to actively seek modified solutions to enable participation for their children.

Analysis of the video data revealed several contextual facilitating and constraining influences, specifically: parental support, repertoire of activities, and accessibility. Parental support represented a key facilitator which could positively affect opportunities for friendship, and were useful in helping to support the social skills of children with IDD in developing and maintaining satisfactory friendships. Perhaps parental support was a defining characteristic on its own to the extent that the friendship experiences and characteristics of some children with IDD in this study mirrored those of TD children. Parental attitudes that supported inclusion appeared to provide children with IDD multiple opportunities, not only to develop friendships, but also to pursue common interests in a variety of settings. These findings are in line with current bodies of research aimed at further exploring the importance of parental involvement in the friendships of children with disabilities (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009). The findings of the current study suggest that participants encouraged to participate in a variety of activities were also noted to have more friends, and a wider spectrum of friendship features. Taken together, these findings suggest that parental facilitation plays an important role in friendship development for both children with and without disabilities. In addition to the parental role, the willingness of peers to support inclusion practices (i.e., modified activities) should also be acknowledged as it created opportunities for inclusion. Not only does it support transcendence of context, but it provides some insight into its potential to contribute to the maintenance of friendship. Studies have shown that the ability of peers to make adjustments for the child with a disability is a characteristic that can solidify the friendships between children with and without disabilities (Buysse, 1993).

It is important to note that in keeping with the primary concern of the researchers, this research reflects the perceptions of children with IDD. Therefore, this study relied on each participant's identification of children who were their friends and his/her understanding of friendship. The video footage for both speaking and non-speaking participants consistently showed interactions with children who the participants identified as friends.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study comprised a secondary analysis of video data drawn from a larger study that centred on a broader research question related to quality of life. Several themes emerged from the original study, including the important contributions of social networks (e.g., friends and family) to quality of life for children with IDD (Renwick & Fudge Schormans, 2011). This secondary analysis provides additional findings beyond the previous studies, which had suggested that the existence of friendship, and social contact with peers is limited for children with disabilities, and that these children have difficulty maintaining friendships with non-disabled peers. Thus, the current study provides a more complex picture of these children's friendships.

Further research focussed more specifically on friendships characteristics for this group of children is still needed. Such research could include more children and from a broader age range. The sample size of the current study was relatively small; involving nine participants but generating rich data about the perspectives of children with IDD about their lived experience of friendship. Future studies could include a larger sample and utilize mixed methods that include both qualitative and quantitative (e.g., questionnaires about friendship) elements. Although this study was designed to capture the lived experience of children with IDD, the data from non-speaking participants was not as highly represented as non-speaking participants demonstrated higher levels of impairment. Capturing the experience of friendship for non-speaking was challenging since the friendship experienced seemed to be greatly influenced by parental participation in the study (e.g., willingness to support participation). Understanding the experience of friendship for non-speaking children with IDD is particularly important, and additional creative approaches for inclusion are recommended in further studies to ensure the that the perspective of these children are being captured. In addition, future research could also focus on *friendship pairs* (e.g., a pair with one friend with IDD and a friend who also has a disability; a pair with one non-disabled friend and one with IDD).

Unfortunately, there has been very little research related to role of parents in facilitating the friendships of children with disabilities (Turnbull, Pereira, & Blue-Banning, 1999), and less research aimed at exploring the impact of additional potential facilitators of friendship formation and maintenance (e.g., personality, gender, and/or the role of siblings. This study suggests that there may be other considerations and strategies useful in creating opportunities for successful friendship formation for children with IDD. It also highlights the historical focus in much of the disability/friendship literature, on the child's disability, would be fruitful.

Significance of the Research

This study captures the perspectives and experiences of children with IDD about their friendships. We used interview questions and when possible, participant-directed capture of video footage, to elicit the voices of participants. The study is descriptive in nature, and rich in the type of data obtained, as it represents the lived experiences, and meanings of friendship as shown and discussed by participants in the study. Video data is particularly powerful because it provides a unique medium for both speaking and non-speaking children to share friendship experiences that are important to them, with minimal influences from outside sources such as parental or teacher reports; which have been used historically in the literature to generate similar data. This study values the role of children as competent and reliable reporters of their own friendship experiences and therefore, addresses a prominent research gap in this area of study, namely the self-reports of children with IDD. Although, much work is still needed to provide better approaches for the inclusion of non-verbal participants and their friendship experiences, this study supports the idea that the voices of children with disabilities can be used in identifying their friends and conveying important information about their own friendships.

This research highlights two main areas for greater focus in the future studies of the friendships of children with disabilities: specifically the role of *parental support* and the notion of *inclusion* in facilitating friendship development. Studies have shown that one instructional strategy used to assist with the development of friendship is planning a friendship dyad's favorite activities to support their interactions (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009). For example, early childhood teachers acknowledge that classroom materials and activities contribute to the formation of children's friendships (Buysse, 1993). This study points to the role of parental support and involvement in creating opportunities for children with disabilities to interact with peers outside of the classroom. In doing so, it highlights an intervention strategy that can further align the friendship experiences of children with and without disabilities. Secondly, this study inadvertently challenges approaches to inclusion for children with disabilities. Historically, there has been debate about inclusive versus specialized classrooms. Although some participants in the study were in specialized classrooms, there were also a number of participants who were not. However, children from both types of classrooms were able to develop and maintain friendships with TD children, and expressed a level of satisfaction (as indicated in the video footage) with those friendships. This study highlights the importance of setting, and supports past research suggesting that young children with disabilities can form friendships in both types of settings (Buysse et al., 2002; Guralnick, Connor, & Hammond, 1995). These findings also support the idea that *inclusion* goes beyond setting, and involves the willingness of peers to support modified activities for disabled peers with IDD, and access to resources that encourage participation of disabled children in activities with TD peers.

Finally, the findings suggest that friendship development for children with IDD is possible, however there needs to be a greater focus on contextual factors across a variety of settings that aim to reduce barriers, and create opportunities that align the friendship needs for both TD and children with IDD.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The study findings call into question past assumptions about the friendships of children with IDD, and their ability to develop satisfactory friendships with TD peers. They also shed light on the importance of the parental role in modeling appropriate social behaviour for children with IDD, and most importantly, in supporting these children in ways that allows for the development of diverse and long-term peer relationships. This research elicited the perspectives of nine children with IDD in order to better understand their lived experiences. It recognizes the importance of children with IDD as research informants; and "supports the notion that children's subjective appraisal of their social support may be a critical mediator of social support effects on friendship development" (Reid et al., 1989, p. 897). Findings reveal that children with IDD readily demonstrate features of friendship commonly associated with TD children. The research also suggests that professionals designing interventions programs and strategies to promote the development and maintenance of friendships of children with IDD, should go beyond a focus on the characteristics of the disability to take a closer look at children's friendships and friendship experiences.

Key Messages From This Article

People with disabilities: Having friends and good relationships with peers is important for all children Inducting children with IDD. Children with IDD must be given opportunities to talk about friendships, and to tell others what they need to feel included among their peers. They also need to have access to support and to resources to make sure that inclusion happens.

Professionals: It is important to consider a number of contextual features such as parental support, each child's repertoire of activities, and accessibility when considering the development of friendship for children with IDD. Professionals should also recognize that many children with IDD can be reliable research informants. The perspectives of children with disabilities should be sought to identify their friends and to convey important information about their friendships and relationships with peers.

Policymakers: The findings suggest that the facilitation of friendship development for children with IDD requires a greater focus on important contextual factors across a variety of settings. Doing so has the potential to reduce barriers and create opportunities that recognize and support the similarities and differences In friendship needs for both typically developing children and children with IDD.

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Examples of Probes Used to Guide Video Recorded Sessions.

1. What are the things that make life **good** for you?

   Probe: things that you do, things that you really like to do? Can you tell me more?
   Can you tell me more? For example?

2. Who do you like to **do things with**?

   Probe: with friends, pets, parents, relatives, others?

3. What are the most **important things other people do** to make life good for you?

   Probes: things that friends, parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, professionals, pets, or others do?
   Can you tell me more?

4. Are there other things you **would like to do** to make life good for you?

   Probe: Is there something you don't do now that you would like to do? Can you tell me more?
   For example?

5. What are the things that make life **not so good** for you?

   Probe: are there things that you have to do that you don't like to do? who are the people who make you tell you to do things you don't like to do'? Can you tell me more? For example?

6. Would you like to talk about **anything else** that makes life "good" or "not so good" for you?