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## Thoughts on friendship

by Cathy Anthony

To have and to be a friend is one of the greatest gifts that any of us can have. It is at the heart of our existence to feel love, belonging and acceptance. Our lives are enriched by knowing that we are of value to one another. Yet, developing relationships and forming friendships can be a challenge for many of us, not to mention for many children and adults who face the extraordinary challenges of having a disability.

Over the years, I have thought a lot about friendships. I have had to look more closely at what friendship means to me in looking at the issue of friendships for my son, Josh, who is 10 years old. I have come to understand that relationships take commitment and hard work. Rarely do they just happen. And although we may have personally experienced the magic of a very special friend who has just become part of our lives, more often special friendships form over time and need to be carefully nurtured so they can grow and develop. In many cases, some level of facilitation occurs to allow connections to be made, whether it is being introduced to another person by a mutual friend or just meeting others by way of sharing similar interests. I know the latter is the case for many of us parents who have connected as a result of our children.

I feel that as parents, one of our important roles in helping to create a meaningful life for our sons and daughters is that of a facilitator to build bridges between our children and their friends. We cannot rely on the hope that friends will just magically appear in our kids' lives, without our active support. This support is especially needed in order to have friendships flow from one environment to another, i.e. from school to home to community. When I look at children enjoying the richness of friendship in their lives, I also see the parents who have devoted time, energy and caring to support the building and continuation of these friendships.

My son Josh has the great pleasure of many acquaintances in his life and he also has the richness that comes with a few true friends. When school closes for the summer holidays, I always get a little anxious wondering if he'll have friends who will call or come over to play. This summer has been especially rich for him. Our phone does ring for Josh and I am always delighted to see his face light up as he grabs the receiver, knowing it is for him. One of his friends from school calls regularly and seems quite happy with the limited conversation that occurs as Josh wanders around the house looking for something to talk about (or rather, show). This is one example

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of my role of facilitator for Josh, as I get on the other line and help to interpret and assist in the conversation. Josh's friends come over to play a lot. We keep the visits fun and interesting. And I think that as a family, we create an environment in which kids feel welcome and comfortable.

Josh's birthday is July 25th. I tend to find summer birthday parties a little harder to plan once school is out and connections are fewer as many children are on holidays. Last year, I had his birthday party early so that Josh could hand out his invitations during the last week of school. This year I was not as organised and felt at a disadvantage wondering how I'd make connections with some of the children who I did not have on Josh's phone list. I asked one of his friends to help and she drew up a list of names and helped to make calls. In my mind I was aiming for a smaller gathering. The morning of his party, I got two calls from his mates saying they had heard about Josh's party and could they come? I gladly said "sure" and raced out to shop for more 'goodie bags'. Josh had a great day and was delighted to be surrounded by his circle of friends.

For me, one of the hard realities I have had to face is that Josh is rarely invited to other children's homes to play. For a long time, this caused me pain. I watched when children would ask their parents if Josh could come to their house and I saw the look of uncertainty that crossed their parents' faces. Over time I have come to understand that they fear Josh's frequent seizures and are uncertain about how they would handle them. I had to remind myself of how fearful I used to be. Just as my life is very busy, so are other families' lives, and in reality, at Josh's age, most children are very independent and do not require the attention, supervision and support that Josh does. I also think that because parents see that Josh uses a wheelchair at times, they are unsure of how they would deal with this in their home environment. What I have come to accept is that Josh's opportunities to be with friends will occur through me inviting kids to our home or through his day care and his activities in the community such as his baseball team.

Over the years, I have come to know some of the parents of Josh's friends. I know they like him and truly accept him as their children's chosen friend. And just as we all have made connections and friends through others, Josh and his friends have given me the opportunity to form friends with other parents. In essence, my son has been a facilitator for me in broadening relationships in my life.

In closing, I would like to share some thoughts and ideas for helping your child in making connections with others. And I would also like to encourage you in your efforts to broaden the network of friends around your child, yourself and your family. It will certainly take time and energy, but, although we are often feeling quite drained and tired from our many other responsibilities, it is the kind of work that feeds the soul and reenergizes us as only friends can do.

## **Tips for supporting friendships**

*Sometimes other kids need information about your child to help them understand him in a bigger way.*

- At school, ask your child's teacher and aide which other children have an interest in your child and your child in them. Get phone numbers and invite them over.
- Include the issue of friends and social connections in your child's Individual Education Plan.
- Create occasions for parties (i.e. birthdays, Halloween).
- Help your child make (or receive) phone calls.
- Invite two or more kids over to play so that there is a little more action.
- Help your child broaden his/her interests so as to find connectors for similar interests (i.e. baseball, skating, swimming, card games, music, or collecting items).
- Watch how other kids dress. What is in style or "cool" for clothing and hair styles? (My husband laughs every time I bring Josh home with his new 'skater' hair cut.)
- Remember that for all of us, friends come and go and change with time. It will be no different for our kids.
- Find out where kids go to hang out (i.e. the local teen centre, the neighbourhood pool). Proximity and continuity are important. The more times we meet and see someone, the greater the chance that a friendship may form.
- Teach social skills like greetings, how to invite someone to play, etc. (At times, we still remind Josh to say "hi" or "bye" to other kids as they greet him.)
- Sometimes other kids need information about your child to help them understand him in a bigger way. (e.g. "when Josh does that, it means..." ; "Josh is really good at..." ; or "Josh likes to...")
- Search out social opportunities through clubs or groups, (i.e. Scouts, Beavers, Brownies, Boys and Girls Club, recreation centre activities, ballet classes).
- Make your home a welcoming and fun place to be. (Four years ago, we purchased a trampoline and it has been well worth the money for the use it gets and for the kids it draws to our home. As I am always outside with Josh anyway, supervision issues are easy.)
- If your son or daughter has a childcare worker, help the worker to see herself as a facilitator of social connections and friendships.
- Find a volunteer or hire someone youthful and fun to

## *What stands in the way of your child developing healthy, caring relationships?*

support your teen in connecting with other teens.

- As kids get older, it can sometimes become a bigger challenge to support friendships. There are times when more intentional strategies are needed. The concept of a "Circle of Friends" or "Support Circle" has been very successful for many children. Ask your child's school to support you with developing a "Circle of Friends". A circle facilitator could be a teacher, school counsellor, child care worker, special education assistant, etc. It is important that the facilitator has good people skills, is committed to the extra work and is someone young people like to be with. It is also important that he or she likes and believes in your child and recognises that your child has lots to offer others. A circle may appear forced to start with, but often true friendships develop and extend beyond the school hours in a very natural way.
- Friendships are reciprocal. Ensure your child has opportunities to give to others (i.e. cards, letters, greetings, phone calls, invitations, and tokens of friendship).
- The possibilities and ideas are endless. Talk with other parents to share strategies. Do not be afraid to ask for help. Talk with kids who are the same age as your child and ask for their ideas and input. But most of all, reach out, search out opportunities and look for as many connections as possible. Remember the rule of natural selection: out of 100 acquaintances, 10 relationships may be formed, and from these, one truly special friendship may be built. And I realise, as I watch Josh playing ball in the lane with a friend of mine and her son, who is a friend of Josh, that it is these special friendships that brighten our days.

## **Removing obstacles to relationship building**

*What stands in the way of your child developing healthy, caring relationships?*

*What measures can be taken to remove or reduce these obstacles?*

Why do you believe that others would enjoy being your child's friend? Think about what you consider to be the biggest reasons. Are these reasons the attractive qualities in your child readily apparent to casual acquaintances? If not, what prevents your child's positive qualities from being recognised? Could any of the following be inhibiting factors?

- communication difficulties
- poor social skills: (e.g., she stands too close to others, she talks too loudly, she doesn't make eye contact, she has "bad manners")
- lack of specific skills needed to participate in the activity

*... can you find settings or activities where your child's strengths will be more readily apparent?*

- aspects of personality (e.g., she is very shy)
- appearance or grooming (e.g., she uses a wheelchair, which others may find offputting, she has bad teeth)
- behaviour problems (e.g., she is aggressive or hyperactive)
- lack of self esteem
- others' ignorance or prejudice about disability issues in general or your child's disability in particular
- others' inability to value these qualities (e.g., she may have a great sense of humor, but is involved with people who are 'working hard to solve a serious problem'; or she is very talented artistically, but is not around art lovers)
- the setting doesn't encourage her qualities to shine through

What can you do to remove each of these obstacles? Can you teach your child new skills or practice old skills more by watching films or getting her a mentor? If your child is still in school, can you add these skills to her Individual Education Plan (IEP)? If your child receives rehabilitation services, can you add a goal to her Individual Health Plan (IHP)? Otherwise, is there a professional who could help? (e.g. a speech language pathologist, social worker, psychologist, rehabilitation counsellor)

Have you ruled out medical reasons for strange behaviour or grooming problems? Could she be experiencing a hearing problem or does she need new need glasses?

Can you help your child learn new ways of behaving by explaining how to improve behaviour, by role playing problem situations with her, or by arranging a signal with her to let her know when she is engaging in a problem behaviour. If you can't change her behaviour, can you get assistance from a professional?

If there is something about your child that can't be changed, such as her basic personality, can you find settings or activities where her strengths will be more readily apparent? For example, one-on-one or small group activities may be more advantageous if your child is very shy, and outdoor activities may be better if your child is boisterous or needs to move around a lot.

Can you educate others about better ways to interact with your child?

Can you find a different environment that would increase your child's involvement. For example, try another class in a different location, with a more understanding group leader or more time for discussion or small group projects?

## **Community connections to explore**

### **Activities to get my child moving**

- ★ sports, exercise, dance, outdoor activities, gardening

### **Games to play or watch**

- ★ card games, board games, TV sports, lawn games

### **Activities that involve helping others**

- ★ volunteer work, helping friends and family

### **Organising neighbourhood or community activities**

- ★ picnics, parties, games

### **Activities to get my child creating and learning**

- ★ hobbies, arts and crafts, cooking, music, collecting, adult education, computers

### **Activities that involve going places**

- ★ going to sports matches, concerts, libraries, museums, visiting friends or relatives, travelling, clubs

### **Becoming a familiar face**

- ★ being a regular customer at neighbourhood cafes or shops

Cathy Anthony (2000)

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