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¡Belong!

Developing and Sustaining Friendships of People with Intellectual Disabilities in the Transition from High School to Adult Life
A Report on Research Findings

Eunji, Rebecca, and Heryka at Lula Lounge.

Report Overview

This informal report highlights research findings from the first phase of the *iBelong!* project. In-depth interviews were conducted in English or French with 18 young people and those who support them. Online surveys were completed by 81 young people, 307 family members and 117 educators. This report gives English responses and statistics, please see the French report for results from those who responded to the French online surveys.

We also spoke to experts in the field of disability, especially those with expertise in relationship building and friendship circles. In each group, interest was intense and confirmed the importance of this project.

This report describes our rationale for undertaking this project, our methodology, and important themes raised by each group surveyed. It is meant to prompt reflection and to invite open discourse on this important topic.

Background to the *iBelong!* Project

Every person needs friends—and our society also benefits when each person is permitted to contribute to the lives of others. But every year across Canada, many young people with intellectual disabilities graduate from high school into a world of loneliness. They no longer have the loved friends, teachers and teaching assistants of their school days or the social life that was part of their school experience. Furthermore, contacts and friendships in the wider community are difficult to find and maintain.

L'Arche believes in the need and right of all people to be fully included in our society, and it is concerned about the lack of friends and meaningful relationships beyond their families that many people with intellectual disabilities experience.

This project began by gathering stories, experiences, and best practices related to friendship from young people with intellectual disabilities and the family members and educators who support them. What helps friendship to form and to last, we wondered. Existing research and resources were also collected. The culmination of the project will be an accessible, interactive website and a handbook (with a Plain English component) to help young people, with their teachers and family members, to develop friends and social contacts that will potentially last a lifetime.

Pictures: Emanuelle and Dan; Phil and Robin (front) at a local diner with men's group; Jaclyn (centre) playing guitar with friends.

¡Belong! Research Report

> "My friends make me feel better. Sometimes they ask me if I need help, and it makes me feel great."
> *Elaine, 22, ON*

Introduction

The *iBelong* website will not create friendships, but will be a source of ideas and inspiration for young people and their family members and educators, a place to exchange experiences and best practices. However, the importance of face to face contact or, as one parent stated, making the effort to "reach out and touch someone," cannot be underestimated. This is how friendships begin; how all friendships begin.

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, explains his vision of belonging: "In community, people care for each other and not just for the community in the abstract. It is people that matter; to love and care for the people that are there, just as they are. And it is not just caring in a passing way, but in a permanent way."

The research for this project revealed quite clearly that there is a wide spectrum of experiences; there is no 'one' story about friendship. We should reflect on this diversity. What does it tell us about how we in the mainstream view friendship? Perhaps we do so through a narrower lens than we realize. And we should celebrate this diversity.

Research Methodology — How the research was undertaken

The research phase for the *iBelong!* project was carried out from January to April 2010. Secondary source research was performed by examining existing resources, publications and reports. Primary research was then completed through two main methods: qualitative interviews and online surveys. These were available in English and in French and we had a good representation of both language groups.

In-Depth Qualitative Interviews

These interviews sought input from young people with intellectual disabilities, their parents/family members, and (when possible), former teachers who were involved in their transition planning process. Five Canadian provinces were represented in these interviews.

The interviews were conducted by someone known to the young person and began by asking the young person about their friendships and social life. To ensure that the voice of the young person was clearly heard, the interviewers could choose between two types of interview formats: written questions asked orally to the interviewee or a pictorial format where the young person could express themselves using pictures and drawings. Parents/family members/educators were invited to contribute to the second half of the interview and discuss their perspective on the above topics. Later, some interviews were followed up by video or audio taping the young person with friends.

Online Surveys

As the *iBelong!* project is national in scope, we decided to create shorter, online qualitative surveys to be disseminated more widely across the country and to facilitate the collection of a wider range of data.

We created three surveys; one for young people with intellectual disabilities, another for those in the education field (teaching assistants, academics, etc) and a third for parents, family members, caregivers and friends of young people with intellectual disabilities. The surveys were disseminated throughout various disability-related organizations, schools, Special Olympics chapters, Community Living groups, and L'Arche networks across Canada.

We received an overwhelming response from across the country; from Port Coquitlam, BC to Yellowknife, NWT to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia! This was exciting and humbling. It was a clear sign that there is a great need for the kind of resource we are creating, and that many people have a lot to say on this topic!

A methodological limitation is that we cannot be sure that we have a fully representative sample. For instance, we had more replies from people in Special Olympics than we expected and fewer rural responses.

Thank You

This non-academic report highlights the stories and experiences gathered from the interviews and surveys carried out over the course of the research. The research findings will guide the creation and design of the *iBelong!* website and handbook.

Research was coordinated by Jessica Vorstermans and supervised by Beth Porter. For further information or questions please contact us at: education@larche.ca

We thank all of the people who participated in the research phase of this project, especially the young people and those close to them who shared their experiences with us. We also thank the interviewers who gave generously of their time in recording this important input, and we thank all of those who took the time to fill out the online surveys. This project is a collaboration of all of these good people and would not be possible without them.

Together we will build a world where everyone belongs!

Why is L'Arche creating this resource?

L'Arche has a unique vision of care giving and community building that fosters inclusion, understanding and belonging. In nearly 200 small homes and day settings across Canada, assistants and friends from diverse cultures and backgrounds share deeply committed relationships with people with intellectual disabilities.

L'Arche is concerned above all with the quality of life of people who live with an intellectual disability. At L'Arche, we see mutually enriching friendships and a feeling of belonging as key elements in the quality of any person's life. In L'Arche communities, where we share life together, friendships readily develop; but at present, very few resources exist to aid those with intellectual disabilities not living in L'Arche to make and keep friends. L'Arche Canada decided to create this online resource because we want to support all individuals with disabilities in having lasting, reciprocal friendships.

Future *iBelong!* Website Information

The bi-lingual online resource will be freely available to all.

Launch date: March 2011

English site: **www.ibelong.ca**

French site: **www.jai-des-amis.ca**

If you would like to be notified of the progress of the *iBelong!* project and the website launch, please email education@larche.ca with this request.
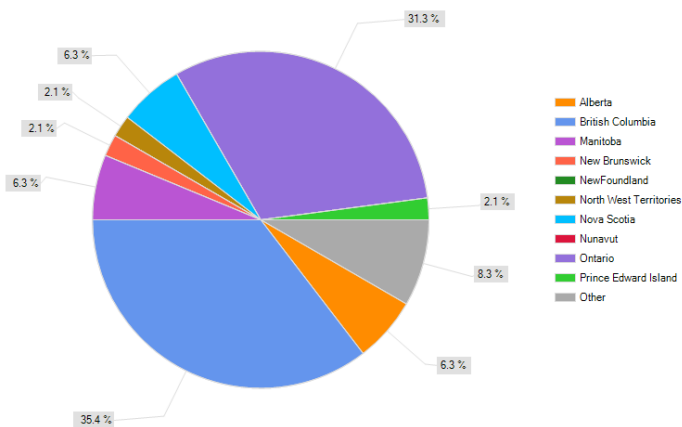
YOUNG PEOPLE

Findings from the surveys and interviews with the young people themselves

In all, 53 young people responded to the English online survey and 18 participated in the in-depth interviews. The young people were eager to talk about their friends and the activities they like to do with these friends.

Limitations and challenges of our research: We cannot verify that only young people with an intellectual disability filled out the online survey. Additionally, some of the respondents indicated that they are older than the 18-30 year old target research group.

Which province do you live in?

- Alberta
- British Columbia
- Manitoba
- New Brunswick
- NewFoundland
- North West Territories
- Nova Scotia
- Nunavut
- Ontario
- Prince Edward Island
- Other

Some Statistics on the Young People who responded to the online survey:

They are from across Canada. (See graph to the left)

Gender:
Female—55%   Male—45%

How long since they left high school:
Less than a year ago—23%
One to four years ago—17%
Five or more years ago—60%

50% are enrolled in a post-secondary programme and 50% are not.

* Please see French report for French statistics

Introduction and overall themes

The online survey and interview questions asked of the young people were focussed on gathering stories about their friendships. The questions were not abstract or quantitative in nature.

The responses from the young people were almost all positive stories about their friendships: "She has a lot of the same interests as me, but she bakes too (like I wish I could) and mom thinks she's absolutely awesome too"; stories about what they like to do with friends: "Tap dance, go out for lunch, visit with her cats and we go to gym together each week-end"; and information about when they see their friends: "The friends from my school I see at each of the Special Olympics sports I am involved in."
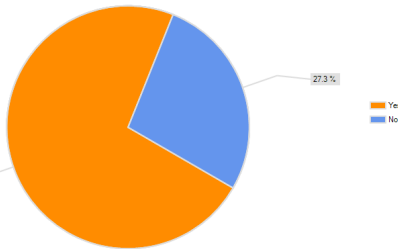
YOUNG PEOPLE ON MAKING FRIENDS …

Young people shared ways they create friendships. Some of the most common ways were offering to help someone and participating or attending Special Olympics events. Others talked about other social groups they attend, and finding out what interests other people have, being social and friendly with new people, and phoning them.

Friends from High School

We know that the social life of most young people who have intellectual disabilities is much richer while still in school. One young person comments, "It allowed me to be with other people who are my peers and I could talk with them." Others talked about meeting people who have the same interests as they did and how having regular contact with people makes it easier to get to know them. When the young people were asked how often they see this friend from high school the answers varied from not seeing each other anymore to a few times a week.

Have you made friends after you finished high school?

27.3 %
72.7 %
Yes
No

Making friends after High School

73% of young people have made friends after high school. This is very positive—but we know that it is probably not indicative of the larger reality as our sample size was small (48 young people). Respondents told us that they made friends in Best Buddies, through Special Olympics or church activities, learning circles, parent groups and at camp.
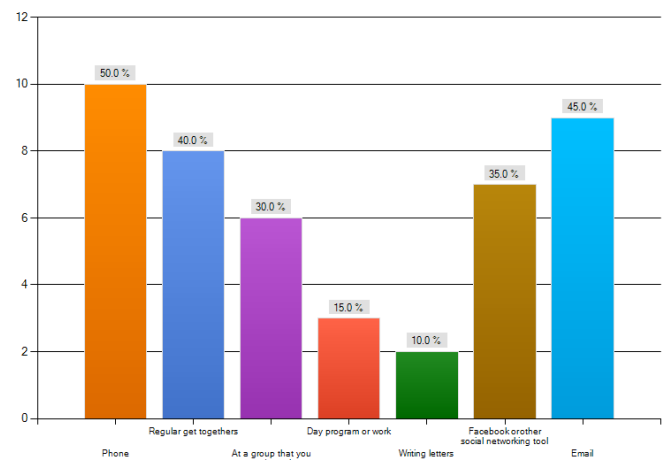
Using social networking tools

The main way young people said they stay in contact with friends was through the telephone, but email was a close second and regular get-togethers was third. 35% also said that they use social networking tools like FaceBook.

How do you stay in touch with this friend? (check all that apply)

50.0 % — Phone
40.0 % — Regular get togethers
30.0 % — At a group that you attend together
15.0 % — Day program or work
10.0 % — Writing letters
35.0 % — Facebook or other social networking tool
45.0 % — Email

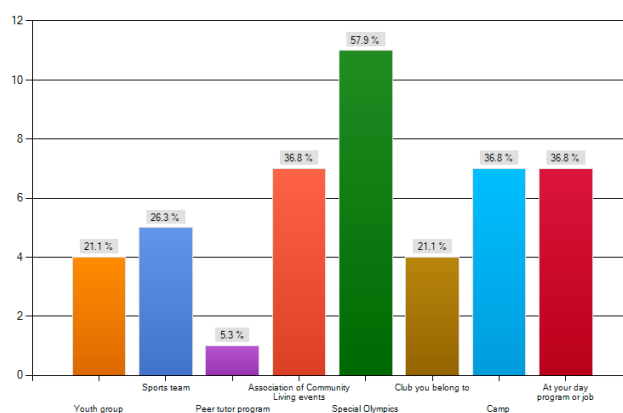## The diversity in ages of friends for young people was great:

75% have friends their age
70% have friends who are younger
80% have friends who are a few years older than them
45% have friends their parents' age

What are programs or activities where you have friendships with other young people:

Check all that apply

21.1 % — Youth group
26.3 % — Sports team
5.3 % — Peer tutor program
36.8 % — Association of Community Living events
57.9 % — Special Olympics
21.1 % — Club you belong to
36.8 % — Camp
36.8 % — At your day program or job

PROGRAMS WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE MADE FRIENDS

58% of young people responded that they have made friendships through Special Olympics events. Other popular places were at camp, work and Community Living events. Only 5% of young people made friends through a peer tutor program.

EDUCATORS

Findings from the interviews and surveys with educators

Seventy three educators who work with people with intellectual disabilities responded to the English online survey and five educators participated in the in-depth interviews.
Challenges of research: Due to the nature of the surveys (online) it was impossible to ensure that only educators in our target group answered the survey.
Additionally, we received only a few responses from rural educators and therefore the section on lessons learned from rural educators is quite short.

Some Statistics on the Educators who responded to the online survey:

They are from across Canada (See box to the left)

Who they are:
25% - Educational Assistants
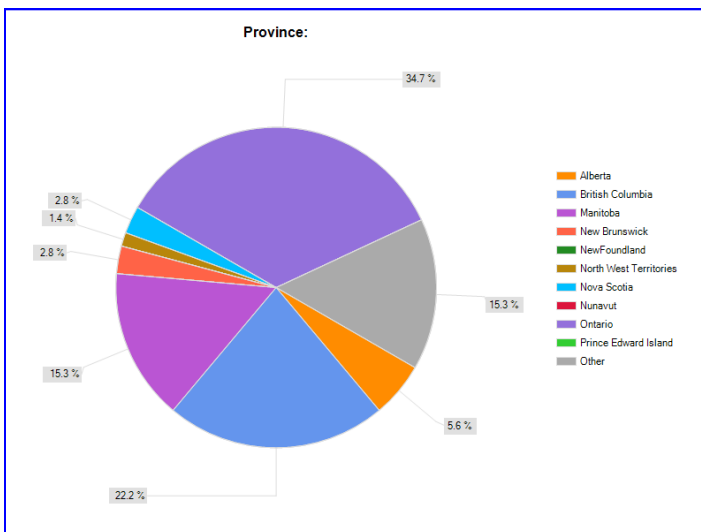11% - Secondary School teachers
Other respondents included: educational consultants, post-secondary professors, support staff, elementary school teachers and principals.

Gender:
Female— 88%   Male— 12%

59% of educators are in a city school, 30% in a town and 11% in a rural area.

* Please see French report for French statistics

Province:

Legend:
- Alberta
- British Columbia
- Manitoba
- New Brunswick
- NewFoundland
- North West Territories
- Nova Scotia
- Nunavut
- Ontario
- Prince Edward Island
- Other

34.7 %
15.3 %
5.6 %
22.2 %
15.3 %
2.8 %
2.8 %
1.4 %

Introduction and overall themes

Overwhelmingly educators talked about the loss of social contacts and friendships after young people leave high school. Educators also lamented the scarcity of places where friendships can form with students who do not have disabilities—the lack of integrated activities or programs. Another important theme was the difficulty young people with intellectual disabilities have forming friendships due to lack of social skills. Also mentioned was the fact that young people need a significant amount of support, usually from their family, in forming and maintaining friendships, particularly with transportation to activities and in communication and organizing encounters.
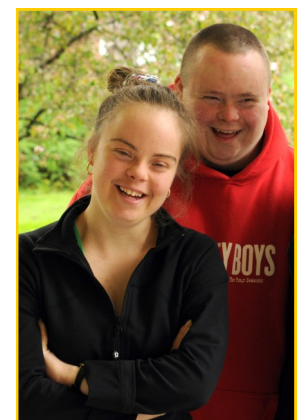
Jamie and Evan

What are the concrete factors in the life of a young person with an intellectual disability that you feel really make a difference in the lasting success of their friendships: Please rate each factor (from very important to has no impact)

Factor	Very important	Important	Not very important	Has no impact
Access to government/agency services and programming	38	17	5	1
Supportive family	58	5		
Level of ability	8	23	27	4
Use of transitional planning strategies	31	27	4	1
Financial resources	19	32	11	1
Work experience	17	29	14	3
Participation in recreational activities at community centers	42	19	1	1
Camp experience	15	30	14	3
Disability-specific associations (eg: Down Syndrome Assoc.)	17	29	16	1

"We cannot assume that inclusion will happen naturally. Teachers should create the environment as early as primary grades. This is done by making sure that proper adaptations take place so that ALL students are involved."
Lauchie, teacher, NS
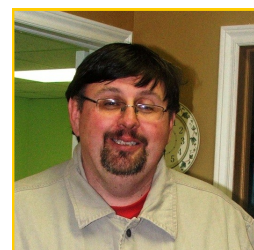
The Contribution of Educators

The predominant thread running through responses from educators was INCLUSION. They spoke of a need to promote inclusion in all areas of school life; in the classroom, at lunch, in sports, and during free time. One educator said, "I help them to connect with classmates at the start of the year. I usually have to facilitate a few of the get-togethers and help to set them up, but as soon as I can fade out, I do."

Another common emphasis was the teaching and modeling of appropriate social skills. Educators also suggested getting students into smaller integrated groups to participate in activities. Lastly, education around people with disabilities and 'ableism' [emphasis on ability and not on the disability]were cited as important. "Teaching 'belonging' is important for ALL students."

"I keep in touch with almost all my former students… Keeping in touch by phone and facebook works for many… my life is so much richer, my family so much bigger!"
Educator

Do you keep ongoing contact with your former students?

72% of educators responded that they do keep in contact . The contact seems to be reciprocal in nature with some students dropping by their former high school or phoning to keep their former teachers updated on their lives.

One educator comments, "I think that it important for the families to be in contact with the educators so as to stay informed of the students in class who are potential friends. Making sure their child is made a part of after-school functions where it is appropriate, ensuring classmates that he/she wants to be apart of their group, [all these matter.]"

Another educator tells us, "Students are invited back to all of our special days. For example, teacher-student luncheons, Halloween parties, Christmas parties. We invite them back to talk with our students as well as [to talk] to leadership classes or social [events], classes regarding life after school, etc. Many of our students belong to music and acting groups and we always go to their productions as well."
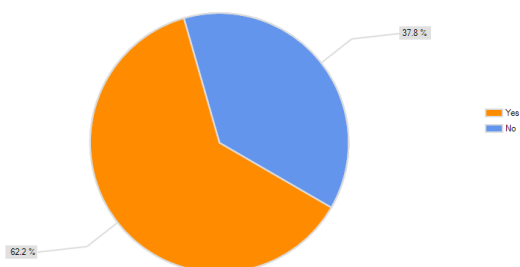
EDUCATORS

Challenges for young people in sustaining friendships after High School

Reponses from the majority of educators were: 1. lack of resources and support, 2. difficulty with accessible transportation to get to events & activities, 3. a lack of opportunity or accessible and appropriate activities & programming and 4. struggling with appropriate social skills. On a more fundamental level, many educators talked about what one educator describes as 5. "the social barrier that still exists in 2010 when it comes to many people in terms of them being friends with those who are intellectually challenged." Another comments, "They are often simply overlooked by their peers and unless someone facilitates the relationships they are difficult to maintain." This is perhaps the most profound challenge, one that parents and family members also talked about (see page 12).

SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS

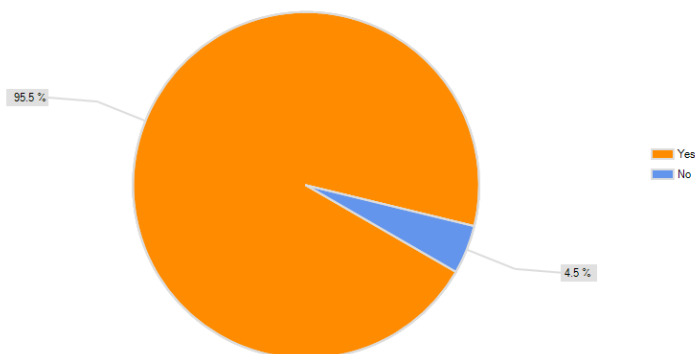Social networking tools are everywhere now. How can they be used in positive ways?

Use of social networking tools by educators

62% of educators have experimented with social networking tools with young people with and without disabilities. The most popular tool was FaceBook—with educators commenting that they use this tool to stay in touch and share photos.

Of those who used social networking tools, 95.5% said that they have been helpful in creating and maintaining friendships. Some educators responded that these tools facilitate communication between their students and students from other areas and keep them in touch with out-of-town family members.

One educator tells us that her student uses text messaging to check in with friends and let them know he cares about what is happening in their lives.

Have you experimented with social networking tools to help young people with an intellectual disability connect with friends?

37.8 % No
62.2 % Yes

Do these tools help create friendships?

One educator commented, "I think they create the illusion of friendship, rather than actual friendship. It may be useful to supplement a friendship, but it does not create meaningful friendships."

Another pointed out that by using these tools, "my student has started to initiate social outings by himself."

Healthy and supported use of these tools is necessary in order to ensure they have a positive influence in the lives of young people.

Have these tools been helpful in creating/maintaining friendships?

95.5 % Yes
4.5 % No

Do you use any of the following transitional planning tools with your students in helping to plan their transition to adult life:

(Check all that apply)

Tool	Percentage
"Circle of Friends"	55.2 %
"MAP"	20.7 %
"PATH"	31.0 %
"PLAN"	13.8 %
School District individualized transition plans (Person-Centered Plans)	72.4 %
Other	13.8 %
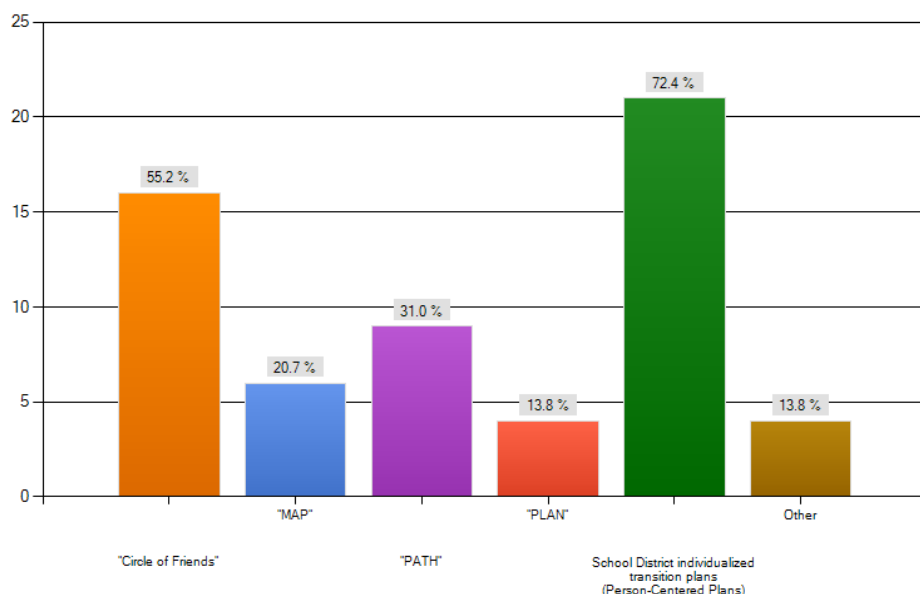
"The whole 'team' around the youth must support friendship in order for them to be successful, particularly in high school as most teens are off doing typical teen things (work, boy/girlfriend/school work)"
Educator, online survey respondent

TRANSITIONAL PLANNING TOOLS

The majority of educators use school district Individualized Transition Plans (Person-Centered Plans) and many also use Circle of Friends. Educators commented that the tools are useful but that there needs to be more family involvement, teamwork and collaboration in order to ensure success. Also, they state that follow up is crucial. One educator commented that Circle of Friends is the only tool that focuses specifically on the creation of friendships. Another educator explains, "I try to establish a connection with the family, social workers and the other teachers involved in this student's life." One said that parents tend to like MAPS or PATH often require evening meetings to bring together a larger circle, which teachers find difficult to attend.

"I think there is a real gap in terms of having young people having access to community involvement and service clubs, that is, in terms of participating as a member. There are workers present for support in housing and employment, but no such supports for creating a sense of community or friendship."
Educator, online survey respondent

RURAL EDUCATORS

We know that living in a rural area can be an additional challenge for young people in terms of making lasting friendships. We asked rural educators what they thought the biggest challenges are for rural youth in terms of making friendships. Transportation was the challenge that almost all educators named, but lack of funding and organized and accessible activities were also mentioned as big challenges.

Rural educators had some success stories in terms of supporting rural youth in creating lasting friendships. One educator underlined the importance of the family, "connecting family to family and teaching families how they can support friendships." Another educator suggested that it was helpful to "have a coordinator organizing inclusive activities."
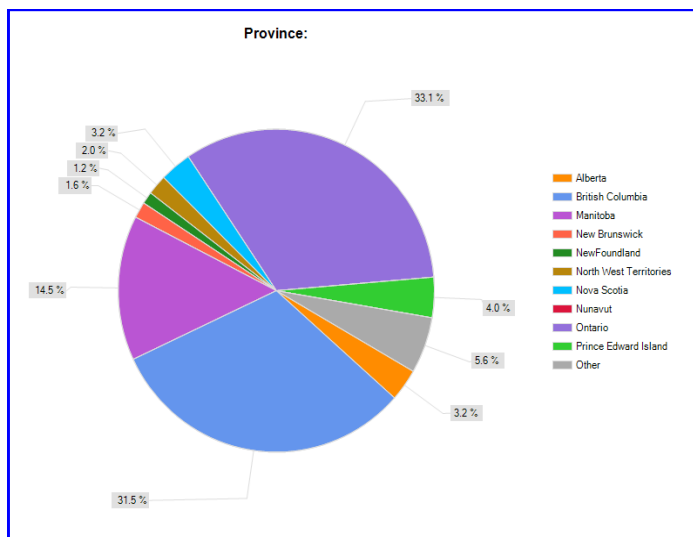
> "As parents we need to be convinced ourselves for our child to have friends; we need to encourage a network of relationships."
> *Parent, QC*

Research findings from "family members" included parents, siblings, and others in a care-giving relationship with young people with intellectual disabilities.

In all, 257 family members responded to the English online survey and 28 were interviewed in the qualitative interviews.

Limitations and challenges of research: As with the other online surveys, it is impossible to ensure that only family members from our target group responded to the surveys.

Province:

- Alberta
- British Columbia
- Manitoba
- New Brunswick
- NewFoundland
- North West Territories
- Nova Scotia
- Nunavut
- Ontario
- Prince Edward Island
- Other

33.1 %
3.2 %
2.0 %
1.2 %
1.6 %
14.5 %
4.0 %
5.6 %
3.2 %
31.5 %

Some Statistics on the Family Members who responded to the online survey:

Where are they from? (See box to the left)

Who they are:
75% - Parents
The remaining 25 % were siblings, extended family members, friends, paid support people, caregivers and others close to young people with intellectual disabilities.

Gender:
Female— 87%   Male— 13%

40% live in a city, 18% in a town and 22% in a rural area.

* Please see French report for French statistics

Introduction and overall themes

This survey garnered the most responses, with parents as the majority of the respondents (75%). Overwhelmingly, parents spoke about their desire for more friendships for their son or daughter. Some had hope and advice to give, but most expressed great frustration and pain in their responses. Many talked about the fact that friendships do not continue outside of the school setting and organized school activities. A great number mentioned the lack of acceptance of their sons and daughters by other youth. Another important theme or area of concern was the lack of friends in the same age group as their son or daughter.

This report will use the word "parent" for reasons of brevity—but the reader is asked to understand that "parent" includes also other family members, friends, and caregivers.

> "Elaine has been integrated in the school system since kindergarten. This helped Elaine so much! She learned from a young age how to make friends."
> *Joan and Robin, parents, ON*
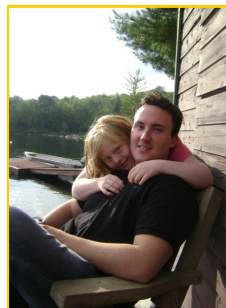
Are you satisfied with the number and quality of friendships that the young person has?

This question garnered an overwhelming response from parents, with their responses revealing much pain and dissatisfaction. One of the biggest issues discussed was the fact that many young people have no 'real' friends whom they see outside of school and school activities. Parents worry that their son or daughter does not have any close friends, or unpaid friends in their lives. Many talked about a desire for their son or daughter to have more non-disabled friends, and others touched on the lack of reciprocity by other students. Furthermore, they feel that they are always the ones to organize outings and activities. However, some reported success with paid friends gradually becoming gratuitous friends over time.

Many mentioned that their son or daughter is friendly and gregarious, but that no one has developed a close friendship with them. One parent commented, "The service system setup depends on 'arranging' outings with strangers...friendships aren't formed this way!" Another common concern from parents was that their son or daughter has little or no friends their own age. (This report will discuss this further, on page 16.)

"My son tries to reach out and spend time with friends but most of the time the other people do not follow through. This is heartbreaking for my son. I really worry now that high school is ending where my son will meet other people to create friendships."
Parent, Online respondent

Are you satisfied with the number of friendships the young person has?

- 45.7 %
- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Relatively satisfied
- Not satisfied
- 32.9 %
- 9.5 %
- 11.9 %
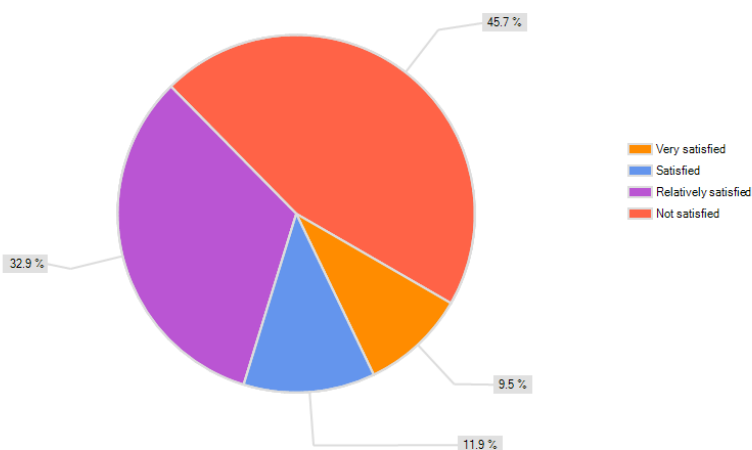
46% of parents are not satisfied with the number of friendships their son or daughter has.

"I see that there is an acceptance of him, but not reciprocity or active engagement by his peers."
Parent

42% of parents are not satisfied with the quality of their son or daughter's friendships.

"My daughter's friendships are almost all associated with members of the disabled community. I would like her to have a spectrum of friends, both able and disabled."
Parent, online survey respondent

"My daughter has few friends but mostly I think they are good friends and care about her."
Parent, online survey respondent

Are you satisfied with the quality of the friendships the young person has?
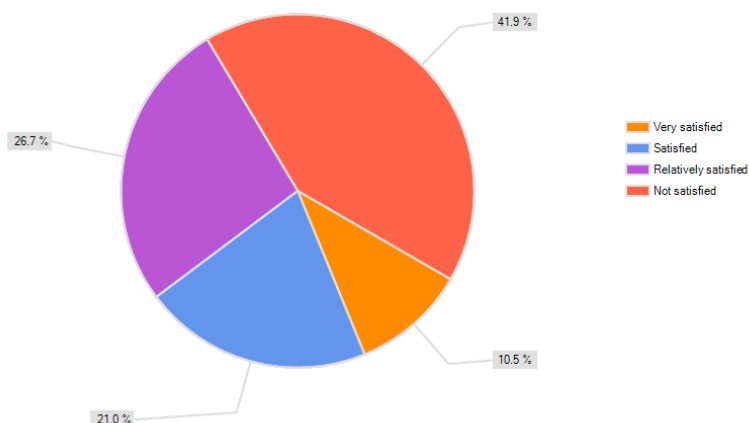
- 41.9 %
- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Relatively satisfied
- Not satisfied
- 26.7 %
- 10.5 %
- 21.0 %

FAMILY MEMBERS

What constraints limit the young person's social life and their ability to make friends and participate in social events?
(Check all that apply)

Category	Percentage
Financial constraints	20.2 %
Public transportation	23.2 %
Parent/care-giver transportation	16.2 %
Personal insecurity of the young person	25.3 %
Lack of social skills	52.0 %
Lack of a peer group in your area	42.9 %
Lack of interest on the part of the young person	23.2 %
Other	30.3 %
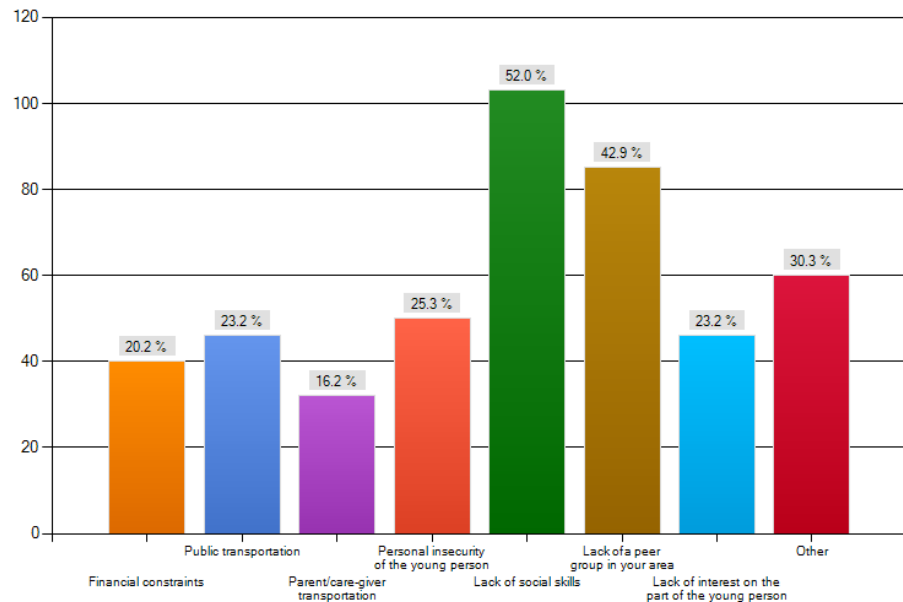
Constraints that limit the young person's ability to make lasting friendships

Many parents mentioned communication as an area of difficulty, stating that lack of verbal or language abilities and communication skills were a major constraint in their son or daughter's ability to form friendships. Another important theme was the lack of integrated activities and programs for young people to meet and associate with other, non-disabled, youth. One of the most difficult challenges mentioned was the lack of acceptance from other youth and a lack of reciprocity from other parents of non-disabled young people. Here, parents touched on the fundamental challenge of acceptance and understanding from others in our society.
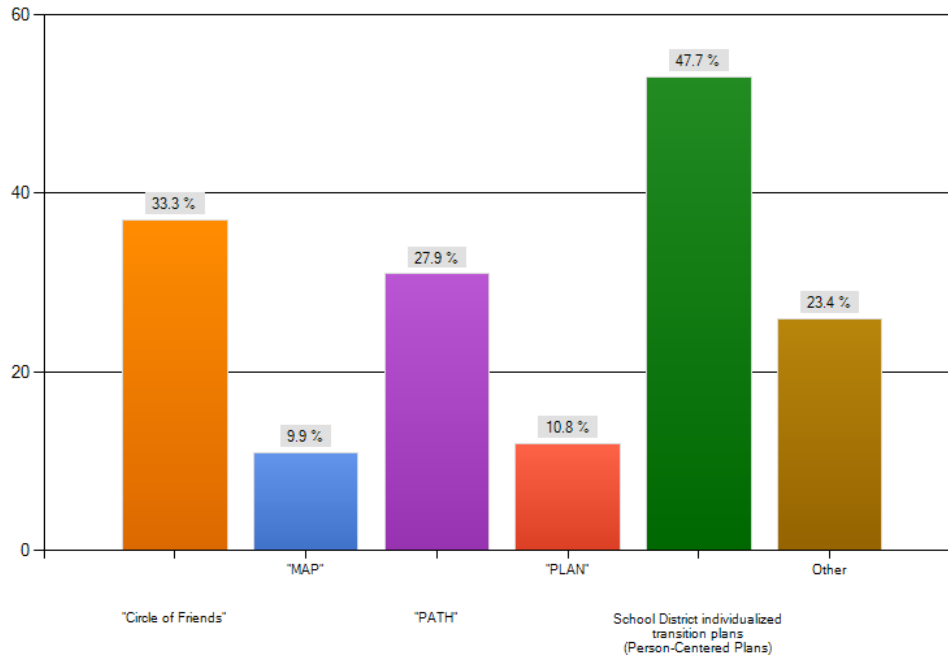
Challenges for young people in developing friendships

The predominant challenges that parents named were lack of resources, lack of transportation, and the heavy commitment of time on the part of family members to drive the youth to social events. One parent from Manitoba explains, "The challenge is to sustain these opportunities. It takes a tremendous amount of organization, never spontaneous." Also mentioned were lack of social skills and difficulty in communication, and vulnerability to being bullied or taken advantage of.

On a broader, societal level, many family members talked about the difficulty in finding other young people who are willing to create a friendship with their son or daughter and to welcome them into their group of friends. One parent explained, "Due to the rejection he has faced over the years, he no longer has hope, he is giving up, depressed and insecure … it is very difficult to keep him motivated… he fears rejection."
This challenge is perhaps the most fundamental and is one that young people and their families struggle with on a deep level.

TRANSITIONAL PLANNING TOOLS

Did you use or participate in any of the following transitional planning tools in helping to plan the young person's transition to adult life:

Bar chart values:
- "Circle of Friends": 33.3 %
- "MAP": 9.9 %
- "PATH": 27.9 %
- "PLAN": 10.8 %
- School District individualized transition plans (Person-Centered Plans): 47.7 %
- Other: 23.4 %

> "The challenge for families is that they need someone to facilitate the process on an on-going basis and they don't have the resources to hire someone to do this."
>
> "The effort was genuine on behalf of the school; however, there are not many opportunities for these students. You cannot work towards a placement that does not exist."
>
> *Parents, online survey responses*

TRANSITIONAL PLANNING TOOLS—How can they be improved?

Parents did not talk about problems with the tools themselves. Most of the feedback pertained to ways in which the tools were used. Many mentioned a lack of follow up on the plans and dreams that came out of the planning sessions, some mentioned that there is a great need for someone to do this follow up and facilitation, and to support the young people and their families. Paid facilitation may be available, but it is too expensive for many. One parent commented, "There needs to be a specific focus on developing friendships at school that flow outside of school activities." Others feel that there is a lack of commitment on behalf of the schools, something which they feel is needed for successful follow up. Others mentioned the need for more education in the classroom on valuing difference and acceptance. Lastly, some were not aware of these tools and suggested more education for families about the existence and use of the tools.

> "Transition is a process and not an event."
> *Parent, online survey respondent*

Challenges and Lessons Learned in Transitional Planning

The main themes mentioned by parents: "One size does not fit all, planning has to be individual;" integration is a fundamental basis for a successful transition; starting early is necessary, as is being pro-active. One parent urged others to get involved in the process, to work as a team—the parents, family members, support people, staff, educators and educational assistants.

Others spoke about the importance of starting early when looking into programming and activities for after high school and to get all of the information you can before the transition process starts. One parent underlined the importance of connecting with other families who are also in the transition process. Lastly, one added that dreams are not to be discouraged: "Make sure to dream with your child!"

FAMILY MEMBERS

"You have to be willing to be the driver. Try to facilitate friendships with other parents."

Rural parent, online survey respondent

RURAL FAMILIES

Of the online survey respondents, 22% live in a rural area. Of these families, 39% do not have what they consider to be reasonable access to the transportation that would permit participation in programs and activities in larger towns or cities and 11% have occasional access.

The biggest challenges for rural families are transportation, availability of appropriate programs and minimal opportunity for impromptu connections and visits. Some parents mentioned the challenge of not having somewhere to meet or to go in order to allow for social connections and friendships to form.

It is clear that rural families have to be more creative as there is a lack of rural or accessible programs and activities. One parent suggests, "Plan fun activities at your home and other children will want to also engage and, not even noticing, they will make a friendship connection with your child." Another suggests looking into community activities that are integrated, such as Special Olympics or other community events.

Lessons learned and advice from parents and caregivers

"Plan early! Get all of the information you can on any programs that are available after he or she leaves school when they are still **in** school. It is quite a disappointing letdown when they leave!"

"Planning needs to start earlier—don't wait for high school! Good school to school (elementary to middle to secondary) will provide a platform for better transition to adult planning."

"Start searching very early on for suitable programs. Don't ever assume it is being done for you."

"Teaching the social skills of friendships, as well as role playing different situations with friends while still in school would help them."

"My experience has taught me that one size does not fit all. Certainly expectations can get revved up in the last year of school by the student only to fall into disappointment (for some) the following September when life is SO different without the rhythm and security of the school day and the presence of dedicated staff. I would say that it is wise to keep your expectation moderate... It takes time, as do so many other things, with students with disabilities. It also takes time for the community to get to know them and adapt to their particular needs... I also recognize the life-long role of advocacy that we parents inherit, especially when our sons and daughters leave school. Support (and respite) for parents is really important. Walking this walk alone is so very, very difficult and often depressing. So we need each other!"

"The best place for kids to learn social skills and how to be a part of a community is in their school community alongside their typically-developing peers. When we allow our kids to be separated, we teach them to live in the world separately. School is the major social arena for your kid—take full advantage of this!"
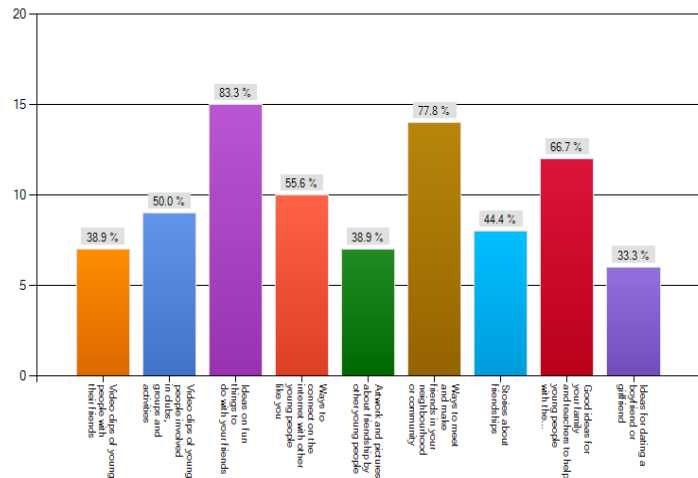
Parent, online survey respondent

YOUNG PEOPLE

> "I would like a way for people to communicate. have respect help people to see the similarities in others not the differences."
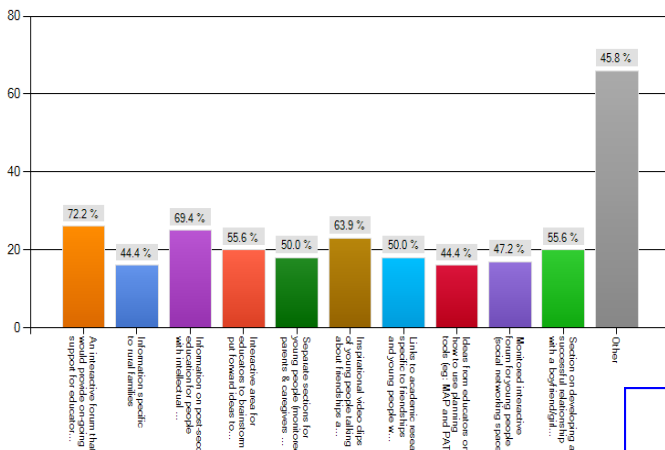>
> *Young person, online response*

What things would you like to see on a website to help other young people make friends?

Check all that apply

EDUCATORS

What is most needed on the new "I Belong!" website for helping young people, and their educators that support them, to develop lasting friendships:
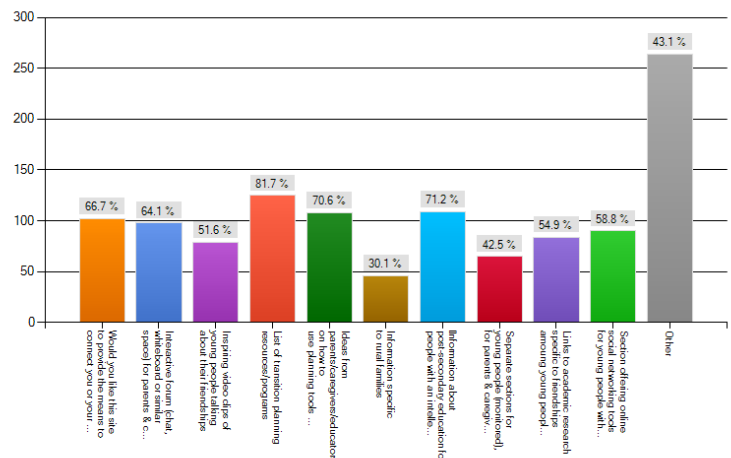
Please check all that apply

PARENTS

> "Links to videos, stories, etc. that are content appropriate, plain language, to help kids develop their social skills, learn about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships"
>
> *Parent, online response*

On the new "I Belong!" website for helping young people to develop lasting friendships what is most needed for young people and their families/caregivers/friends:

(Check as many as apply)

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A NOTE FROM THE RESEARCH COORDINATOR

Growing up in L'Arche was a life-giving experience for me - full of joy, challenges, laughter, celebration, diverse relationships and community. When I was asked to coordinate the research phase of the *iBelong!* project I was excited and overwhelmed. I knew that the research had to be guided by the voices of those who would be using the website and handbook. I wanted to gather their stories, challenges and experiences.

As the interviews and surveys began to flow in, I would read them eagerly. Sometimes with tears and sometimes with laughter. The entire time I was convinced of the necessity for such a resource. Convinced of the necessity of relationships across difference. Convinced of the value of the gifts that people with intellectual disabilities bring to relationships and to our society.

Jessica Vorstermans, MA May 2010.

Jessica and friend, Jesus, in L'Arche Dominican Republic.

"A fundamental principal of relationship building is that you have to be present in the places where there are people you would like to have a relationship with on a consistent and regular basis."
Susan, parent, Ontario

Adam and a friend

Conclusion

This project is a voyage of investigation and discovery that we are embarking upon together. As we talk to young people with intellectual disabilities, parents, family members, educators and others in the field of disability we are called to rethink our categories and definitions of friendships and relationships.

One important contrast that stood out in the research was between the responses between the young people and those of their parents and educators. Overwhelmingly the young people were excited to talk about their friendships and only a few talked about not having friends after high school. When parents were asked to talk about whether they were satisfied with their son or daughter's friendships, they revealed a painful and frustrating story. Many brought up the fact that their sons and daughters have few or no friends their own age. There is a clear contrast here between the definitions or concepts of friendship held by young people and those who support them. If one defines friendship by the satisfaction that one gains from it, then the concept is subjective and individual. Where one person sees a friendship that brings happiness and satisfaction, another might see a superficial relationship or too great a difference in years for the friendship to be of value. Perhaps the basis for a friendship does not lie in a shared age group, but in shared interests or hobbies and sometimes in a shared history at school or in family or community.

What is clear from this project is the need for further initiatives and education around inclusion and the fostering of relationships across difference. This needs to happen in elementary schools, in high school and in the community. Many parents and educators talked about the loneliness that their sons and daughters feel because other young people do not seem to want to form friendships with them. This is the fundamental work we, as a community of people who know and recognize the gifts that these young people bring to relationships, must work on together. Jean Vanier tells us, "There is a lack of synchronicity between our society and people with disabilities. A society that honours only the powerful, the clever, and the winners necessarily belittles the weak. It is as if to say: to be human is to be powerful."

Together we can change and create a world where relationships across difference are valued and each human person has a place of belonging.