

INTRODUCTION

Friendship is important for all of us! This includes people with and without disabilities. People often feel better and happier when they have friends. As part of a research project about the choices people with disabilities make about work, we interviewed 16 people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD). These people also chose family members and professional staff people for us to interview. We asked them how they made decisions about working and making friends.

In this article, we want to share what people with IDD, their family members, and professional staff said about friendships. We will explain how people with IDD described their friendships in both community jobs and sheltered workshops, and how this influenced their choices about working in the community. *(Please see the glossary on page 8 for key definitions.)*

What these people said about friendships might be important to you! They told us about their experiences with friendships and work. How are your experiences similar or different? We've included questions for you after each section. There is space for you to write your answers. In the second part of this article, we will give you ideas about keeping your friendships as well as building new ones in the community. *Here is what the group of individuals, family members and professionals said...*

Friends are important no matter where you work!

Individuals in both sheltered workshops and community employment shared that being friends with their co-workers is very important.

Individuals were happier at their jobs when they got along with, and liked, their co-workers (people they work with). It didn't matter where they worked. Friends provided encouragement and support that helped individuals feel self-confident. One individual was able to spend half the day working in the community and then return to the sheltered workshop to get together with friends.



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ **Who are my friends at work?**
- ▶ **Do my co-workers encourage and support me, and make me feel confident?**



Write down your answers here.

These individuals felt proud about community work.

They proudly shared their experiences in community employment with their friends at the sheltered workshop.

Individuals working in the community liked to talk about the amount of money they made working in the community with friends at the workshop. This helped influence co-workers in the sheltered workshop to pursue community employment. Several individuals who went from the workshop to jobs in the community received praise on their accomplishment from co-workers at the workshop.



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ Am I proud about the type of work I do?
- ▶ Does my work make me feel important?



Write down your answers here.

If you answered no, list three steps you can take to improve your current situation. If you can't think of steps to take, talk to your family, friends, or professional staff to help with ideas.

1.

2.

3.

Individuals felt accepted by peers at the workshop.

Friendships in the sheltered workshop between employees with disabilities were found to provide a sense of connection. Individuals felt they were on the same level as their peers in the workshops and had strong friendships with their peers.

One staff member said, "Well, I just think [co-workers from the sheltered workshop are] his peers. They're people that are on the same level with him, and he enjoys that. I think that he feels accepted; I think that he feels more accepted in the workshop than he has in the past at competitive employment opportunities."

Friendships with co-workers in community jobs didn't feel quite as strong.

Sometimes, friendships with co-workers in community jobs didn't feel as deep or special as they did with individuals with disabilities in the workshop.

While friendships in the community between individuals and their co-workers without disabilities were also found, individuals didn't feel as secure as they did with their peers with disabilities in the workshop.

One staff member said, "...he has some relationships at work [in the community]. I think work is a strong base for his...feeling of belonging and feeling of value. And he has some people there that he has a relationship in that sort of way. I'm not sure he has any strong, really social relationships at work of, "Hey, the weekend's coming up. You want to get together and go do something?" kind of level."

Sometimes people felt different from their co-workers without disabilities.

Some individuals felt different or excluded in the community because of their disabilities. Sometimes this made individuals not want to work in the community. They wanted to stay where they felt safe and secure.



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ **Have you ever felt different or excluded at work?**
- ▶ **Do you feel more secure about your friendships from the sheltered workshop?**
- ▶ **How would you describe your friends from the sheltered workshop?**
- ▶ **How would you describe your friends from your job in the community?**



Write down your answers here.

Individuals missed their friends from the sheltered workshop when they were working in the community.

Sometimes individuals were scared that people without disabilities wouldn't talk to them or that they couldn't make friends outside of the workshop.

Sometimes, missing friends in the workshop made people want to quit their community jobs. They felt that they would have to give up their friends from the workshop if they worked in the community. One individual explained that he needed to sacrifice seeing his friends in the workshop because of the long travel distance between the workshop and his community job.

Another individual wasn't interested in getting a long-term job in the community because he was afraid of losing friends from the sheltered workshop. He said, "I don't really care if I have a job. I like being here with my friends." Although his employment support person encouraged him to make friends at his community jobs, he said, "I miss not seeing my friends [from the workshop]. I miss not being at the workshop."



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ **Have you ever wished you could just stay with your friends instead of working in the community?**
- ▶ **Have any of your friends felt this way?**
- ▶ **How can you keep your important friendships from the workshop while you work in the community?**



Write down your thoughts here. If you're not sure, talk to your family, friends, or professional staff for suggestions.

So what does this mean?

Friendship is an important part of being happy at your job. Individuals felt strong friendships with peers in the workshop. They often thought they would lose these friendships if they worked in the community. Sometimes they decided not to work in the community, even though they wanted a different or better job. Sometimes, their fear about making new friends with co-workers in community jobs affected where they chose to work. **Now, that is disappointing!**

How can you maintain your friends from the sheltered workshop, build friendships at your community job, or create new friendships in the community? On the next page are some ideas!

Maintain friendships from the sheltered workshop:

- ▶ Before you start a community job, make a plan with your support staff on how and when you will visit the workshop and your friends there.
- ▶ Exchange phone numbers or email addresses with workshop friends.
- ▶ Make regular plans with them, such as going out to eat, going to the movies, and shopping.
- ▶ Host a gathering such as a potluck dinner. (Ask a friend or family member who drives to help with transportation.)



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ **In the last month, what fun activities have you done with your friends from the sheltered workshop? What plans can you make with your friends this month?**



Write down your fun plan, such as a menu and party ideas, or a movie to go see, here.

Build friendships at your community job:

- ▶ Bring in birthday cards for co-workers to surprise them.
- ▶ Bring in a box of doughnuts (or another treat) to share.
- ▶ Find co-workers who share your interests in sports, movies, or other hobbies.
- ▶ Explore social opportunities. Depending on where you work, there may be activities such as volunteering to clean up a park together, or holiday parties after work. Some employers even offer social activities that can teach you things, such as computer classes, a softball league, or hiking clubs.



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ **Are there social opportunities available to me at my job?**



Call your human resources office for more information. Write down their phone number here. Make notes of any information they provide you with.

Create new friendships in the community

As you read through the suggestions, use the worksheet on page 8 to write down your notes.

► **Join a group that does something you like.**

Maybe you like gardening, maybe you like photography, maybe you love nature...well, join a group! Local art centers and recreation departments usually have groups on everything from pottery to bird-watching.

► **Participate in sports activities.**

Socialize with others while doing sports can be fun and healthy. Dance, yoga, hiking, swimming... The possibilities are endless! Here are two places to get started:

- Your local YMCA. To find a YMCA near you: www.ymca.net/maps/
- Special Olympics. To find a program near you: www.specialolympics.org/

► **Join a self-advocacy group.**

Self-advocates are people with disabilities (including IDD) who work to protect their rights. They also work to protect the rights of other people with disabilities. Working together, groups of self-advocates can get a lot done.

Examples of groups include:

- People First. To find a location near you, do an Internet search for "People First of (your state)."
- Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE): www.sabeusa.org/
- The National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC): www.ndsccenter.org/about/about.php
- Massachusetts Advocates Standing Strong: www.massadvocatesstandingstrong.org/

► **Join a cultural or religious group.**

These groups can offer a wide range of activities for people with and without disabilities. Just one example:

- Yachad, The National Jewish Council for Disabilities. www.yachad.org

► **Join a social club.**

Clubs are great options for getting out and taking advantage of all your community has to offer. From plays to museums to movies, social clubs are clearly focused on making friends!

- Best Buddies International helps create friendships between people with and without IDD. www.bestbuddies.org/find-a-program

► **Volunteer for a cause you believe in.**

Maybe caring for animals is your passion. Why not volunteer at your local animal rescue? Or maybe you like to work outdoors. Check out Habitat for Humanity! Joining a volunteer group is a great way of making friends and helping out a good cause. Also, you'll gain new skills that you can use in a job in the community!

► **Take a class.**

Your local recreation department, chamber of commerce, and community college are just three places to explore for adult education classes. They usually offer everything from learning a foreign language to computers.

► **Help your community through national service.**

Serving your community is a great way to make a big difference in your life and in the lives of those around you, all while meeting new people! Service members do such things as tutoring, building houses, and cleaning parks. www.serviceandinclusion.org/

Still in high school? Even more opportunities!

You can join student government or other school leadership projects. Or you can get involved with after-school programs like your school's drama club. Ask your teacher or guidance counselor about all the options!

Your employment support person can help you to...

- Explore your local community to identify classes, clubs, activities, or volunteering options.
- Meet others who share common interests and experiences.
- Prepare for meeting a new friend by coordinating an activity and coming up with topics to talk about.
- Practice talking to new people.
- Bring your friends to social gatherings.



Stop and reflect.

- ▶ What activities do you like to do that can lead to making new friends?
- ▶ What would you like to explore in your community?



Write down your own list of resources here. Add contact information and notes from the websites we listed. Write down phone numbers, names, and notes below.

My local community art and recreation centers	Addresses and phone numbers	Personal notes
1.		
2.		
3.		
Hobbies that interest me	Addresses and phone numbers for places where I can do these hobbies	Personal notes
1.		
2.		
3.		
Places I can volunteer	Addresses and phone numbers	Personal notes
1.		
2.		
3.		
Classes that interest me	Addresses and phone numbers for places where I can take classes	Personal notes
1.		
2.		
3.		
Self-advocacy groups close to where I live	Addresses and phone numbers	Personal notes
1.		
2.		
3.		
Other ideas/activities I can do to make new friends	Addresses and phone numbers	Personal notes
1.		
2.		
3.		

Conclusion

Meaningful friendships are really important for everyone. It's natural to form friendships in a sheltered workshop. But you can also meet people in other ways, and participate in social activities. You can keep the friends from the workshop that you already have, and also make new friends. There are so many options out there in your community waiting for you! Remember, building new friendships takes time, so don't give up.

GLOSSARY

IDD

Intellectual or developmental disabilities. People used to call these this kind of disability “mental retardation.” Today, IDD is a better term to use.

Professional staff

People who are paid to support someone with IDD, such as job developers and job coaches.

Community jobs

Jobs in the larger community, working with people without disabilities. These jobs must pay at least minimum wage.

Sheltered workshop

A workplace just for people with disabilities. These jobs usually pay less than minimum wage.

ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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For more information

Ashley Wolfe | 617-287-4351 | ashley.wolfe@umb.edu
Jaimie Timmons | jaimie.timmons@umb.edu

Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston
100 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, Massachusetts 02125

Our Websites

www.communityinclusion.org
www.thinkwork.org

Social

www.facebook.com/communityinclusion
www.twitter.com/ICInclusion
www.youtube.com/communityinclusion