



# Strategies for Connecting People With & Without Disabilities

*“Knowing I have... these people ... who are my friends and my family, that are there when I need them. It gives me such relief that they are there. I can go and talk to them whenever I need them. It’s wonderful. It is wonderful...”*

*(Self Advocate, North East)*



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**Being together at the same time and in the same place with others who share your interests is not a guarantee that friendships will blossom. But this connection is an essential ingredient!**

**There are many possible ways for people to connect (or re-connect) with each other. Here are some of ways we may be able to use in our professional (and personal) lives to help people with and without disabilities benefit from getting to know each other.**

**I. Deepening Existing Relationships in places already frequented:** Don't overlook the people and places that an individual already knows and spends time with and at. Even if there are not yet friendships there, there are real possibilities of deepening connections where someone may already be comfortable, confident and known.

**II. Become a member of a group** that shares the same interest(s)/need(s). Becoming a "member" of a formal or informal group is the entry for many friendships:

- ◆ **Recreational/social/civic organizations** abound in our communities. You can find out about these opportunities in several ways:
  - ◇ Community "mapping" activities that involve staff and people served.
  - ◇ Meetup (<https://www.meetup.com/>) is a site that lists dozens of different interests and can be used to find other folks who share the same passion.
  - ◇ Widening the Circle's website includes a section with lots of links to activities that people with and without disabilities can enjoy together(<http://thearcofmass.org/resources/recreation/>)
  
- ◆ **Faith-based groups.** Surveys show that many people with disabilities have been denied the opportunity to participate in the religion of their choice. And faith-based organizations have a variety of activities within their scope (services, choir, childcare, social events, community service, adult bible study, etc.) in which people with and without disabilities can connect. Some efforts have been formalized:
  - ◇ Bridges to Faith/New Bedford ([www.bridgestofaith.org](http://www.bridgestofaith.org))
  - ◇ Spiritual Connections/Fall River (<http://peopleinc-fr.org/programs/spiritual-connections/>)
  
- ◆ **"Needs"-based groups.** Fun, civic-mindedness and spirituality are not the only entrees to membership that can grow into friendships. Many people get connected with others who are trying to deal with similar challenges in their life, including:
  - ◇ Weight Watchers (<https://www.weightwatchers.com/us/find-a-meeting/>) or TOPS (<http://www.tops.org/TOPS/FindAMeeting>) for folks struggling with their weight.
  - ◇ Alcoholics Anonymous ([http://www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/find-aa-resources](http://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/find-aa-resources)) or Al-Anon (<http://al-anon.org/find-a-meeting>) for those living with addictions issues.
  - ◇ Bereavement groups (<http://www.hellogrief.org/resources/massachusetts/>)

◆ **Tips to improve the opportunities for membership:**

- ◇ **Be sure that the individual is truly interested** in the organization in which he/she is pursuing membership.
- ◇ Make sure that the individual is as aware as possible of **what may be expected from members**. This includes:
  - ◇ Learning the **jargon/language** used by the particular group. For instance, sailors use a very different set of words/phrases than bird watchers do.
  - ◇ **Dress appropriately** to fit in with the group. A member of a hiking club will dress very differently from a choir member.
  - ◇ Understand the different **rituals** that are important for true membership in a specific group. This may be especially important in churches, for example.
- ◇ Whenever possible, a **staff person who is familiar/personally involved with the group** that you're supporting someone to join should be tapped for that role. This may mean polling staff outside the individual's immediate circle to find the right person. That person should be the consistent supporter for this purpose; rotating various staff will likely reduce the chances of success.
- ◇ Try to **find someone** (not a staff person in the individual's support organization) **who is already a valued member within the group** in which you are supporting someone to be a member. Successful membership is greatly increased if there is a mentor/champion/sponsor/gatekeeper on the "inside" who can be welcoming and supportive of a new member.

**III. Start a group** for people who may share the same interest(s)/needs: It's possible that there may not be a local group that reflects the interest(s) of the person you support. Consider starting a club/group and invite people with and without disabilities. (New groups can post on <https://www.meetup.com/>.)

**IV. Tap into existing programs:** There may be some programs in your area that intentionally bring people with and without disabilities together with one of their goals being the development of friendships. These include, but may not be limited to:

- ◇ Best Buddies ([www.bestbuddiesmassachusetts.org](http://www.bestbuddiesmassachusetts.org)):
- ◇ Unified Sports (Special Olympics) (<https://www.specialolympicsma.org/what-we-do/transformational-education/project-unify/>)

**V. 1-to-1 Match Making:** Some approaches seek 1-to-1 matches between people with and without disabilities right from the start. These include:

- ◇ Citizen Advocacy (<https://www.nqcitizenadvocacy.org/>): Staff from NQCA would be happy to share information on how their program works.
- ◇ Community of Friends ([www.betacomm.org](http://www.betacomm.org)): For decades, Beata Community Partnerships has been matching adults they support with volunteer members of their communities, based on shared interests.
- ◇ Big Brother/Big Sister (<http://www.bbbs.org/>): Although not disability-specific, BB/BS has often made successful matches between people with and without disabilities. There are chapters all over Massachusetts.
- ◇ Connect with Friends (JF&CS)? (<http://www.ifcsboston.org/Our-Services/People-with-Disabilities>):

**VI. “Group matching”:** Another approach is to gather a group of people with and without disabilities to do things together, with a goal for also evolving 1-to-1 relationships:

- ◇ Club 21 (<https://alternativesnet.org/ways-to-help/be-an-ambassador/club-21/>)

**VII. Learn new skills or seek new knowledge in Community settings.** For instance, learn new cooking skills in an adult-education class at the local HS or Community College instead of at the service agency office or in the group home.

**VIII. Connect with your neighbors:**

- ◇ Host neighborhood events (block party/Holiday caroling).
- ◇ Bring food/cookies to new neighbors.
- ◇ Shovel snow/mow lawns/do errands for elderly neighbors. Or just visit and talk!
- ◇ DON'T do stuff that emphasizes differences from neighbors (hosting cookout for multiple group homes instead of inviting neighbors).

**IX. Reconnect with people from the past:**

- ◇ Locating old friends (via face-book and other social net-working sites).
- ◇ Inviting trusted ex-staff to become voluntarily re-involved (if they left the organization on good terms that do not represent a danger for the individual).

**X. Using Interns/short-term volunteers:** Many organizations host interns (paid or unpaid) or volunteers in their organizations for relatively short periods of time. Quite often the organizations will use these interns as companions to the people they support, charging them with the responsibility of going on community outings/activities. A better use of a short-term person would be to have him/her help the individual establish membership somewhere in their community and to work as the “introducer” between people the agency supports and other community members. With hard work (and a little luck) the interns work will live beyond their tenure in the form of lasting relationships that they helped facilitate.

**XI. Additional Resources:**

- ◇ “Friends: Connecting People with Disabilities and Community Members”, by Angela Amado at [https://ici.umn.edu/products/docs/Friends\\_manual.pdf](https://ici.umn.edu/products/docs/Friends_manual.pdf).
- ◇ “How to Build Relationships” by Al Condeluci listed on Widening the Circle’s “How To...” webpage at <http://thearcofmass.org/programs/widening-the-circle/how-tos/>.
- ◇ 150 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL: Social capital is built through hundreds of little and big actions we take every day. We've gotten you started with a list of nearly 150 ideas, drawn from suggestions made by many people and groups. Try some of these or try your own. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/whatyoucando.htm>
- ◇ Widening the Circle’s website at <http://thearcofmass.org/programs/widening-the-circle>