

Friendship and social life

Vision Statement



People with a learning disability across all ages have a right to develop friendships¹ and enjoy a social life. Friendships can help people feel happier, included and valued, and enhance wellbeing. Mencap's vision is a future where everyone with a learning disability has the same opportunities as anyone else to participate in their community, meet people and develop friendships.

Current situation

We know that people with a learning disability tend to have smaller social networks. And their social networks are often solely made up of relationships with support staff and the people they live with². 34% of adults with a learning disability have no more than yearly contact with friends³, which means social isolation is common.

There are various reasons for this inequality. People with a learning disability have fewer opportunities to meet new and existing friends. Children and young people are often educated outside of their local area and not with local children - any friends they do have may live far away. They often do not get the support they need to help them be part of the community at the times they want, and may rely heavily on family for transport and to find activities.

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People with a learning disability can face many physical barriers to having a social life, including a lack of accessible transport and suitable public toilets. A lack of information about where other people of their age go to socialise can make it difficult to even take the first step. They may not feel welcomed in mainstream social settings and might require communication support to help them meet and talk to others, and develop long-term friendships.

What we want

Mencap believes that, the following needs to happen to make this a reality:

- People with a learning disability must be given more opportunities to meet new people and existing friends through activities they enjoy
- People with a learning disability must get the support they need to live an independent life, to take part in activities, and to make friends safely
- People with a learning disability must have choice and control over their social life, who they spend time with, and who their friends are
- Society must recognise that having friends is valuable to people with a learning disability, and having friendship is an important part of their wellbeing
- Venues and events, as well as transport, must become more welcoming and responsive to the needs of people with a learning disability

Friendships can be the basis from which loving relationships develop. Please see our vision statement on relationships and sex for more information about what Mencap thinks about this issue.

1. European Convention of Human Rights, Article 8
2. Mason, P., Timms, K., Hayburn, T., and Watters, C. (2013) 'How do people described as having a learning disability make sense of friendship?' *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 26(2): 108–18.
3. Emerson, E. and Hatton, C. (2008) *People with Learning Disabilities in England*, Centre for Disability. Research; much of the research in this area has been small scale and is not current, however, the insights from this particular study are matched by anecdotal evidence and other small scale studies.

Last reviewed: July 2016
Next review: currently being reviewed