



The  
Children's  
Society

# Friendship for All

*A 'how to' guide to friendship inclusive short breaks  
for disabled children and young people*

[childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall](https://childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall)

Giving young  
people the  
opportunity to  
make friends.

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# 1 Why friendship and short breaks?

Disabled children and young people experience particular difficulties when making and securing friendships. They are more likely to attend schools miles away from their local community, lack the capacity to use social media to keep in touch with friends and sometimes experience communication and transport difficulties.

The Children's Society's direct experience has demonstrated that short break services have the potential to provide innovative and creative opportunities for disabled children to enjoy community activities with their chosen friends without incurring additional cost. The Children's Society in York are now working in different local authorities to encourage and support their short break teams to include the option of a friendship link within their regular short break services.

Young people can find it challenging sometimes to include a friend in their short break as they may have to make compromises about what activities they do. This is all part of friendship though and they are valuable life lessons which otherwise may not be learnt.



‘Building in friendship for my child with autism was invaluable. He learned to be more patient, he understood you can’t always do what you want, but need to negotiate, both children learned to understand they could both do what they want if they share and take turns.’

**A parent of a young person**  
on a pilot friendship short break scheme



Many short break services and direct payment schemes allow young people to join in specialist youth clubs and out of school groups which give young people the opportunity to make friends. We are distinguishing this type of short break from a short break that allows a child to choose one of their existing friends and spend time with them while building up the skills to make arrangements with minimum support and become as independent as possible. We are not suggesting that all children should or would want to use their statutory short break provision to see their friends, but we are suggesting that those who want to build social networks could use this as a chance to do so.

In one of our pilot local authorities The Children's Society supported the short breaks team to conduct a paper based questionnaire survey to all families in receipt of short breaks. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix 4. This survey gathered information about individual young people and who they were friends with, it also told the short breaks service how they were currently spending their short break time and if they would be interested in spending this time with their friend as well as their carer/volunteer. This could be replicated in any local authority and the information can be used to map out who is friends with who and make some immediate links between young people whose friends are also in receipt of the short break service.

The questionnaire results will also indicate some young people who have friends who are not part of the service and may have no additional needs. It is still possible to include these young people in your service, it will just involve more time finding out about the friends. Details of how to do this are in the rest of this guide.

# 2 Identifying friends

There are several different ways of finding out who young people are friends with and who they may wish to spend some of their short breaks with.

## Talk to your client

If your client is verbal and confident they may simply be able to give you a list of friends (often from school). If there are lots of friends then give them an opportunity to think about who they most enjoy spending time with. You may wish to support a large group of friends to go out at the same time, this is obviously more expensive and takes more organising. In the Fun and Friendship programme we usually arranged for one friend to be included in the short break initially and then gradually included more friends if it felt manageable.

Be careful when speaking to a young person that the friends who they identify are actually genuine friends and not support staff from school. In our experience, young people sometimes form a strong attachment to their teaching assistants and can get confused about who is their friend and who is paid to care for them. Also, they often spend so much time with support staff that they seem like friends.

## Talk to parents/carers

Sometimes young people have difficulty identifying who their friends are; it can be helpful to speak to parents and children together. Sometimes parents might also be able to identify friends who don't go to school with the child. It is also useful to involve the parents in this discussion because they will be asked to give their consent in order for the friendship link to be arranged.

## Liase with schools

On occasion your client and their parents/carers may not be able to tell you who the child's friends are. This is particularly common in situations where the young person is non-verbal or more profoundly learning disabled and often taken to school by taxi. In these examples, parent/carers are denied the chance to meet with their child's friends and friend's family at the school gate and therefore informal networks are not given the opportunity to develop. In these situations staff from school are a valuable source of insight, they spend more time than anyone with the young person and their peer group and can advise you on who seems to get along well. They will know of any disputes or frictions between the young people and they are also very helpful in making contact with the friend once they have been identified. Education reviews can be a good opportunity to meet with other professionals to discuss friendships and share ideas.

# 3 Making contact with friends

Once a young person's friend has been identified and they have agreed they would like their friend to be invited to join them on their short break you need to make contact with them. If the young person's friend is already part of your service then the task is a lot easier - you can contact the family directly via their social worker/placement worker. However if you don't know the other child and they are not currently accessing your scheme, this can sometimes be a bit of a challenge...but there are solutions.

If the friend is not from your client's school and has been suggested by the family, you can ask them to make contact directly and get permission to share their contact details with you. This is the most straightforward route to getting in touch! However, often the child's friend is someone in their class and they do not have their contact details, sometimes they don't know their surname...this is where the detective work begins!

It is useful in these circumstances to have a good chat with the child's class teacher and explain that you are trying to include a friendship element to their short break in order to enhance the quality of the break and support the young person to develop vital life skills in making and maintaining friendships. In our experience teachers are delighted that someone is supporting the child to develop these important life skills and will help in any way they can.

'...support the young person to develop vital life skills in making and maintaining friendships.'

Explain that you have the child and family's consent to be making enquiries and that you would like to make contact with a young person in their class. Obviously they are not in a position to share contact details with you. However, if you write a letter to the friend (and carer) you can ask if the school could ensure that they take the letter home in a book bag.

Then you need to draft a letter and make sure that your client is completely happy with the wording. Young people can be quite justifiably sensitive about information being shared with their friends about them, so it is important they are happy with the way it is written. Ideally you should construct the letter together.

In appendix 1 is a sample letter that can be cut and pasted onto your own headed paper and amended as necessary.

# 4 Seeking consents and information

Once you have heard back from your client's friend and they have shown an interest in joining in your client's short break, you need to find out a little bit more about them. If the young person is an existing client then you should have up to date information about them and you can skip this section. However if they are new to your service, you will need to find out some information before inviting them to join your client on their short break. You should now have a name and contact details and you should make arrangements to do a home visit at a time when the child and their parent/carer is at home.

## What information to gather

The information that you need to gather will depend largely on your own organisational requirements and you probably have paperwork for conducting assessment of need and gathering medical information. If the young person would be eligible for your service within their own right then they should be assessed through the official process. However, if the young person doesn't have any or many additional needs then you may want to consider using paperwork to gather essential basic information to keep the young person and your worker safe. In Appendix 2 please find a copy of a generic information form entitled 'Young person profile' which you can copy and paste if useful.



# ‘You will also need to follow your organisation’s data protection policies...’



The other key document you will need is a medical consent form which you will no doubt complete for all young people you work with. Even though your client’s friend has joined your service in a different way, they are still under 18 and become your responsibility when they are out with your staff. Therefore you need to have full consent to seek urgent medical assistance and issue any prescribed medication if necessary. You also need GP’s name and contact details and details of any regular medication the young person is using, just as you would with any young person.

You will also need to follow your organisation’s data protection policies and complete the same paperwork for the young person. You will be keeping some basic information on file for the young person so you need permission to hold the information securely and to share it with any staff that may be responsible for them.

# 5 Writing agreements/ protocols

Now that you have...

- Identified your client's friend
- Made contact with the friend
- Completed the necessary paperwork in order to keep the young person safe

...you can begin the really rewarding part which is setting up the link and making arrangements for the young people to meet up.

It is important to be clear at this stage and all along that your client is the main recipient of your service and they are choosing to invite their friend to join them on occasional visits. It is important therefore to write a letter of agreement to the friend and their family to explain that on occasions they may invite out their friend with their support worker's help but this will not necessarily be a regular event. This means that you can remain flexible and if your client should fall out with their friend (which could happen frequently!) you are not expected to provide a service to both young people. In Appendix 3 you can find an example letter which has been used in a pilot service to explain to your client's friend in a friendly but clear way, what they should expect.

You also have to risk assess based on the information you have gathered about the young person whether or not they need an extra member of staff or whether one worker will suffice. It may be that if the young people are really good friends, they are very easy to manage together. This is because they will simply enjoy being together and rely less on having to pay for activities like the cinema or bowling.

A social worker who recently set up a friendship link pointed out that it is extremely important to emphasise the importance of confidentiality, she shared her experience and practice with us:

'One of my biggest concerns when setting up a friendship link recently was confidentiality for all involved. I was conscious that, although there is information that a short breaks worker needs to know to provide the care required and be aware of the 'bigger picture', other short breaks workers and the other child and their family, do not need to know. For example, if one of the young people has started their period – their own short breaks worker may need to know to support them, but others involved do not need to know unless the child chooses to share this information with their friend (which I am sure many do!). Similarly, family circumstances should be shared on a 'need to know' basis and not discussed between workers.'

**Social Worker**

Local Authority Health and Disability Team

Where two sets of carers are involved in making the friendship link work it is important to make sure that they don't discuss any personal information about their child with each other. Even if the carers work for the same organisation, personal information should be shared only on a 'need to know' basis and just because a young person wants to go out with their friend, it doesn't mean they are happy for their friend or their friend's carers to know everything about them.

Often, workers report that they find their job a lot easier when they take out friends because they can take more of a 'back seat' and act as a facilitator of a friendship rather than feeling they have to be constantly entertaining their client. A sessional worker from a pilot friendship project made the following observation when reflecting on the friendship link:



‘Four hour sessions can be long and lonely places, especially when working with a non-verbal young person and if they have a friend with them they entertain each other and you don't need to do all the entertaining so it's much easier acting as the role of facilitator and letting the natural friendship just work.’

**Social Worker**

on a pilot friendship short break scheme

# 6 Recruiting short break workers with friendship in mind

If you have decided that your service will now be flexible and offer young people the chance to enjoy their short break with a chosen friend, you need to ensure your staff and volunteers are prepared to meet this need.



On the friendship for all website [childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall](https://childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall) you will find freely downloadable bespoke training resources for inclusion in your introductory preparation training and short break worker development. In addition to this you could consider including a 'friendship question' in your interviews for new staff or volunteers and making an addition to the job description.

The change to the short breaks worker role which is now extended to support children's friendships should be reflected in the content of their job description. When recruiting new short breaks workers, the inclusion of an interview question aimed at capturing the abilities, confidence and skills required to be an 'enabler' of children's friendships will help to avoid any future ambiguity about their role in this respect. These changes will also help to reinforce the importance your organisation places on friendship in the lives of disabled children.

**The following interview questions could help to get you started;**

'Tell us what you consider to be the most important considerations when supporting disabled young people to make the most of their short breaks with their friends.

*or*

What essential skills and knowledge will you need in order to facilitate and encourage children and young people to have fun with their friends in the community?

*or*

Short breaks can be used as an opportunity for young people to see their friends. How would you support young people to see their friends within short breaks?'

**Job descriptions can be strengthened and updated to accurately reflect the activities required;**

To work in partnership with parents and carers to support children and young people to enjoy their short breaks with their chosen friends and maximise their opportunities to make new friends.

You will assist and support children and young people who have short breaks to have choice and opportunity to meet with friends when they have a short break, helping to build young people's confidence and independence.

# 7 Other ways to provide friendship opportunities in short breaks

Short breaks services are encouraged to flexibly respond to the suggestions and ideas in this guidance and many are already doing so. There is much we can learn from the innovative practice of short breaks service providers who have made simple, pragmatic adaptations to practice, and in so doing, created new opportunities for children to see their friends in a way which is sustainable and affordable.

## Networking approach in Nottingham

The Inclusion and Disability Short Breaks team in Nottingham train and empower their short breaks carers to play a leading role in helping the children in their care to have fun with their friends. Their 80 plus strong team of short breaks link workers, network through support groups, group supervisions and a Facebook page, to help identify other children who enjoy the same activities and have similar interests to those they are supporting. This pragmatic approach results in children connecting with the friends they have already, usually their school friends, but also encourages new friendships to emerge.

Whilst carer networking is the key to the scheme's success, support workers ensure careful management including adherence to the protection of children's data. The scheme is very popular with short breaks carers and parents, but most importantly, it is now routine for children to have the chance to see their friends, a choice they didn't previously have.

'I love spending time with my friend, it makes me feel happy.'

'I feel OK now to do new things.'

### Team Manager

Short breaks, inclusion and disability, Nottingham.



Participants at the last national Short Break Network conference shared examples from their own practice, highlighting a range of approaches that work for them, alongside the challenges they can encounter:

'Some friendships develop at clubs and holiday schemes – but this is not something that is explicitly planned for.'

'I would like to include a young person or child as part of short break care. However as carers are approved for one child at a time it would be difficult to do.'

'We often pair carers and young people together. If we know two young people are friends we endeavour to link their sessions together.'

'Sometimes children's friends have short breaks at the same time with the same carer.'

'Sometimes we take young people out on group outings which feel a lot more worthwhile and fun and a lot more interesting for the young people.'

'When we had our own playroom for short break workers to use we saw friendships develop, two of the children knew each other from school.'

'Short break carers who are approved for up to three young people have been able to develop good matches for three young women to have sleepovers.'

'We have been supporting some parents to pool their personal budgets together, to allow their children to spend time together or buy in shared services.'

# 8 Commissioning and Friendship

If you are commissioning new short break services in your Local Authority, this is a golden opportunity to embed a 'friendship approach' from the outset. This is exactly what Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council has done after being advised by The Children's Society. In section 1.2 of their Service Specification they provide a full explanation about the importance of friendship in the lives of disabled young people and the barriers they often face in achieving this. They go on to say that.....

## **Including a friend in activities.**

This service specification acknowledges the importance of friendship to children and young people and intends to adopt the approach recommended by The Children's Society report 'Friendship for All'.

The provider is invited to offer children or young people using the service the opportunity to include a friend where this is possible. This can be someone who is not eligible for a service. Where this happens, the friend would need to pay for the session they attend.

This is a great way to ensure that any new short break services are required to provide a friendship based link as and when a young person chooses to have one. (A full version of the Solihull Short Breaks Service Specification can be found on the [childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall) website).

# 9 Appendix 1: Sample letter to your client's friend

Dear James and Parents/Carers,

I work for the (name of organisation and service). We support Peter to go out once a fortnight with a support worker. They usually go to town and do some shopping and sometimes go to the park to play football.

During a meeting with Peter, James was mentioned as someone whom Peter likes to spend time with and shares interests with. We have the permission of Peter and his family to contact James and ask if he would be interested in meeting up with Peter and his support worker to spend time together.

Our team and experienced staff have been working with disabled young people in York for over (number) years; we have sessional workers and volunteers who are trained to support young people to get involved in community activities and to have fun with their friends in a safe and supportive environment.

I am helping James to arrange this and your school have kindly agreed to pass this letter on to you.

This won't happen every Saturday and it might just be an occasional activity. If you think this sounds like fun and you would like to be included then could you and your parents/carers complete the slip and return it in the prepaid envelope (or you could take it to your teacher and they will pass it on to me).

I really look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

---

Name

---

Contact telephone number or email

---

I would be interested in finding out a bit more about joining Peter during his short breaks.

Yes / No (Please circle)

# 10 Appendix 2: Young person profile

## Young Person Profile

Name

---

Address

---

---

---

---

Tel. Home

---

Tel. Mobile

---

Email

---

Date of birth

---

Social worker

---

Social worker contact Tel.

---

## Emergency contact details

Name of contact

---

Tel. Mobile

---

## People I work with

- Senco
- Support worker
- Social worker
- Youth worker
- Connexions worker
- Anyone else?

---

## Support needs

Please tell us about any support you might need to work on the project. For example, with transport, personal support, equipment, communication. Please be as specific as you can:

---

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---

---

## What do you find easy / hard?

---

---

---

---

Form completed by:

---

How they are related to you:

---

Their signature:

---

Signed:

---

Date:

---

# 11 Appendix 3: Letter of agreement

Dear James and Parents/Carers,

It was lovely to meet with you last week and have a chat about going out with Peter. I have now met with Peter and his support worker and Peter is really looking forward to being able to go out with you in a few weeks.

Peter's support worker Tom will give you a ring in the next few days to arrange where and when you would like to meet. It would be really helpful if you and your family could make transport arrangements to meet Peter; if this is something you ever find difficult we can help with transport from time to time.

We hope that you and Peter have a great time together and hopefully you will want to go out together again. Peter, with support from Tom, will contact you in the future to arrange any further meeting if this is something you both choose to do, it will not be a regular weekly activity.

Please phone me if you have any questions.

Kind regards,

# 12

## Appendix 4: Short break and friendship questionnaire

Male  Female  Age \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like some support to make new friends?

What town or city do you live in (or closest to)?

Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what type of support would you like

Do you have review meetings with your social worker or at school?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Yes  No

Does anyone ask you about your friends in this meeting?

What makes it difficult to see your friends?

Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Does anyone ever ask if you need help to make new friends?

Would you like to be asked about friendships in reviews and plan to go out together?

Yes  No

Yes  No

Does anyone ever ask if you need help to see your friends?

Anything else you want to say about friendship?

Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you see your friends enough outside of school?

Yes  No

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it in the freepost envelope provided.**

# The Children's Society

**It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect. Too often their problems are ignored and their voices unheard. Now it is time to listen and to act.**

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable and have nowhere left to turn.

We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.

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**[childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall](http://childrenssociety.org.uk/friendshipforall)**

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Names used in this report have been changed to maintain anonymity. All photographs posed by models.

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