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# **“I’m very comfortable with her” : An exploration of the importance of friendship to young women with disabilities and how these friendships are created**

## **Abstract**

### Introduction

There are 600,000 people with disabilities in Ireland. Friendship has been indicated as an area of concern for people with disabilities. Friendship has a positive effect on life satisfaction, success and mental health, in particular among young women. It has also been highlighted as an important life occupation that is central to facilitating performance of occupation. The research seeks to answer the question “What is the importance of friendship to women in Ireland with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 30 and how do they create these friendships?”

### Methodology

A sample of fifteen semi-structured interviews from women aged 18 to 30 with a variety of disabilities were accessed from a larger dataset of 93 semi-structured interviews collected over the last three years and were analysed using thematic analysis. These interviewees were recruited from mental health services, primary care centres and public health offices across the Mid-West of Ireland.

### Findings

Three main themes were generated from codes. These were the temporal aspect of friendship in creating and maintaining meaningful friendships, the support found in friendship and friendship as a vehicle for occupation.

### Conclusion

These findings mirror those found in other research completed on the subject of friendship. They add to limited research on this topic with this cohort of women between the ages of 18 and 30 who have a disability. It also underscored the importance of friendship with regards to meaningful occupation. In practice, understanding about how people with disabilities participate in occupation can enhance the client-centred and evidence-based nature of occupational therapy services into the future.

## **Introduction**

Loneliness has been associated with many negative health outcomes for people with disabilities such as physical and mental health problems and a poorer quality of life (Gilmore and Cuskelly 2014). As people with disabilities lead longer, more independent lives it is important that more research should be undertaken to address the difficulties people with disabilities have with creating and maintaining friendships (Lavin *et al.* 2006).

A census taken in 2011 reported 600,000 people with disabilities living in Ireland. Of this number, there are 22,938 women between the ages of 20 and 30 living with disability and 9581 between the ages of 15 and 19 (CSO 2011). However, little attention has been paid to the specific experiences and needs of women with disabilities in Ireland (NWCi 2008).

## **Literature Review**

Friendships are at the centre to human experience. Stable and rewarding friendships have been found to be the arguably the single most important factor influencing a person's quality of life (Kennedy & Itkonen 1996). In particular, women devote a good deal of time and involvement with friends. Friendships between women gain more importance than even family relationships with the onset of adolescence and young adulthood (Bjarnason 2004). A friendship network is important to women's mental health and development (Baruch & Brooks-Gunn, 1984, Hawthorne 2006), in particular with women in early adulthood where other female friends help them to navigate life transitions (Martínez Alemán 2010).

Friendships also create an increased level of life satisfaction among women, especially those not involved in romantic relationships (Borzumato-Gainey *et al.* 2009).

A national study was conducted in Ireland around people with intellectual disabilities and from this data one of the themes emerging was friendship and relationships (Iriarte *et al.* 2014). Friendships and social support systems have a positive effect on success for people with intellectual disabilities over their lifetime (Goldberg *et al.* 2003). However, gaining such friendships can be difficult for those who have disabilities. Social activities often take place with only family members, paid carers or through their day placements (Dyke *et al.* 2013). In fact, the average size of social networks of people with intellectual disabilities, excluding staff, is 2 people (Robertson *et al.* 2001).

People with intellectual disabilities are also more likely to be involved in activities with friends who also have intellectual disabilities than with friends who do not (Emerson and McVilly 2004). However, these friendships should not be considered lesser as having one good close friend may mean the difference between having a better quality of life and just living for a young adult with a disability and may ensure active participation in society (Bjarnason 2004). It has also been found that friends who also have disabilities are preferred as they are able to feel more comfortable with them and better understood. Friendships between disabled and non-disabled people can result in a power imbalance where the disabled person may be exploited (Mason *et al.* 2013). A lack of friendship and social support can also be seen with other disabilities such as multiple sclerosis, wheelchair use and epilepsy, especially if cognitive problems are also present (O'Brien 1993, Thomas *et al.* 2006, Viteva and Semerdjieva 2015).

According to the AOTA practice framework, the term occupation is used to describe “everyday activity.” Occupation increases satisfaction and gives meaning, purpose and belonging to people’s lives (Wilcock 2006). Friendship has also been found to be of primary importance for participating in leisure activities, in particular among younger people (Arnon *et al.* 2008). Research has shown that active participation in meaningful activities with friends leads to a more fulfilling life (McIntyre and Howie 2002). Studies of activity patterns of people with disabilities revealed that they participate in fewer active leisure activities, particularly informal social activities, across all age groups (Idler and Kasl 1997, Law *et al.* 1999). Increased friendship could increase the participation in occupation by people with disabilities and lead to a better quality of life (McVilly *et al.* 2006). From this literature the research seeks to answer the question “What is the importance of friendship to women in Ireland with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 30 and how do they create these friendships?”

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research is used to provide a deeper understanding of social trends by understanding how people interpret different experiences, the meaning they place on their experiences and understanding the ways people perceive their worlds (Merriam 2009). The paradigm used with this research was critical disability theory as it includes a complex conceptual understanding of disability (Shakespeare 2006, Meekosha and Shuttleworth

2009). It puts disability at the centre as it compares the norms and values of society with their actualization in the daily life of disabled people, friendship in this case.

The participants' stories accessed for this research project were part of a larger dataset of 93 semi-structured interviews collected over the last three years. Purposeful sampling was used to collect a diverse range of experiences from individuals with a variety of different disabilities (Merriam 2009). Inclusion criteria needed participants to be over the age of 18, able to communicate in English (or via a translator) and willing to talk about experiences of being treated differently based on the presence of disability or chronic health condition. Exclusion criteria were people who are unable to communicate and anyone experiencing an active stage of mental health difficulty. The participants were recruited from mental health services, primary care centres and public health offices across the Mid-West of Ireland. Information sessions were offered about the study where an information letter and research poster was provided and any questions were answered. Potential participants were given at least a week to consider whether they wished to be involved. There were 15 participants involved in this project between the ages of 18 and 30 with varying disabilities as provided in the Table 1 below.

<b>Participant No.</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Age</b>
4	Intellectual Disability	28
15	Intellectual Disability	23
47	Intellectual Disability	28
53	Intellectual Disability	20
54	Intellectual Disability	20
77	Intellectual Disability	20
5	Paralysis	24
13	Depression	28
23	Wheelchair user 10-20 years	25-29
27	Epilepsy	18-25
29	Epilepsy	18-25
30	Epilepsy	18-25
31	Epilepsy	18-25
32	Epilepsy	18-25

91	MS	26
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Table 1.

Of this set, all the interviews had been transcribed and contained field notes that detail the interview context and key points made. During the research project, thematic analysis was used as a method of analysing and identifying patterns or contrasts within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, Braun and Clarke 2013). During phase one and two, I familiarised myself with the interview transcripts. Initial codes were generated using the software programme Atlas.ti. I also examined and added to any coding assigned by earlier researchers. Phase three involved searching for themes within the codes identified using a thematic map. During phase four, with support from research supervisor and other research students, a new map was made and the themes with the strongest evidence to support them were identified. Within phase 5 the themes were clearly differentiated from each other and refined for analysis. Finally, phase six of thematic analysis involved producing a report.

High quality research is essential if findings are to be incorporated into occupational therapy practice. To achieve this credibility, dependability and confirmability must be used to increase the validity of any findings. To increase credibility the inclusion and exclusion criteria were clearly stated above (Silverman 2000). I will also situate myself clearly in relation to the project. I chose this topic as being involved in the Best Buddies programme in my youth I saw the difficulty people with disabilities had in making friends first hand and the chance to research this drew me to this project. During the analysis I debriefed with my peers and supervisor to discuss decisions made and receive feedback (Babbie 2011). To increase dependability I recorded my analytical decisions throughout the process in the Atlas.ti programme (Babbie 2011). Thematic maps were also created to display my analytical process. To increase confirmability quotes from participants were included to indicate where the themes have arisen from (Merriam 2009).

Ethics was approved for this project from the HSE through the University of Limerick's Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Approval number EHSREC11-35). All data is encrypted and stored on a password protected external hard drive stored in a locked room in the Department of Clinical Therapies at the University of Limerick. Only the principal researcher had access to the data. The data received for this research was already anonymised. When creating the report and in any further presentations participant numbers

will be used throughout which is considered best practice to protecting anonymity (Braun and Clarke 2013). Informed consent was gained when all participants were asked to sign a consent form before engaging in the research interview (Calveley 2012).

## **Findings**

Analysis of the coding generated three overarching themes; 1. The temporal aspect of friendship in creating meaningful friendships, 2. The support found in friendship and 3. Friendship as a vehicle for occupation.. The themes and subthemes are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

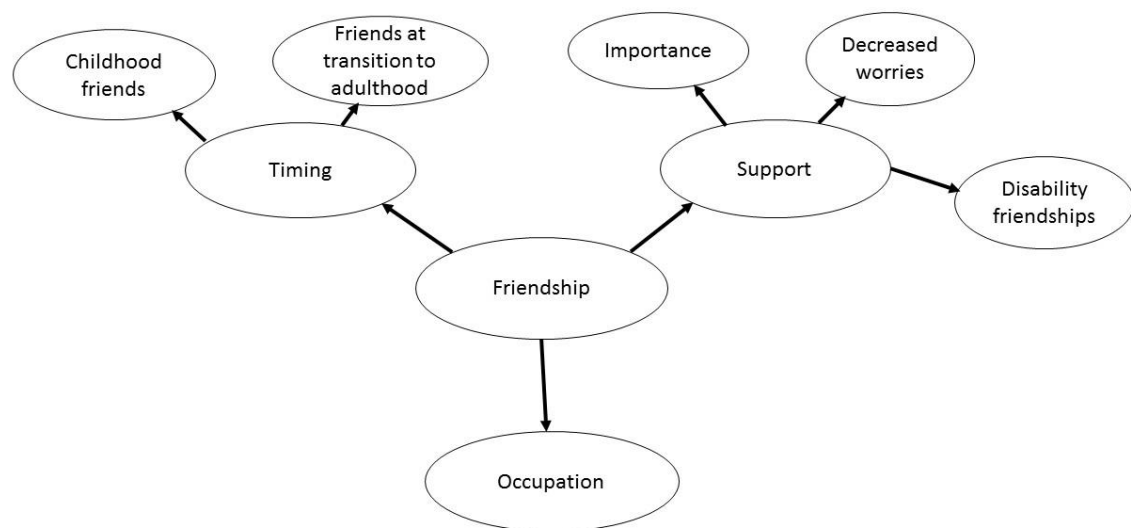


Figure 1.

### **Temporal aspect of friendship**

New friendships can be made at various times throughout your life. The results of this research indicated that meaningful and lasting friendships for young women with disabilities are made at two distinct life points. There were two subthemes generated within this.

The first subtheme found that friends obtained in childhood could continue as a meaningful and lasting relationship into the later stages of life. P53 when discussing socialising with friends said:

*I know her since she was two....I go to her house we talk.... I know her a long time....  
I'm very comfortable with her*

P53 values this longstanding friendship. The time spent with this friend over the years increased her ease with this person and allowed a deeper relationship. P54 also stated in her interview that her only friend in the community was a childhood friend:

*I have a really good friend who lives down in the village. He would come up sometimes or else I would go to his house. We have known him since....[we] were really young.*

Without this older friendship her links to the community would be practically severed as she mentions that all her other friends attend the centre she is in during the week and that she does not see them outside of there or during the weekend. These more superficial friendships are not seen to hold the same value by this participant in comparison to her childhood friend.

The second subtheme discusses making new meaningful friendships later in life with people who are at a similar point in their lives. P13 when discussing her friends in other countries said:

*..because you know you tend to make your closest friends in your mid to late twenties, your more mature friends*

Having made these lasting friendships abroad she was not able to visit them regularly and felt dissatisfied with this aspect of her life. P91 also discussed making lasting mature friendships in college in comparison to her home village. She said:

*It was during the four years in college I got to know people in [city] so I decided to move to [city] because I didn't have any friends really in [village], they were different kind of people.*

Having the opportunity to interact with new and different people at a similar life stage allowed her to choose friends she had more in common with and felt more at ease with, leading to lasting friendships. This idea could be seen throughout many of the interviews where making new and valued friends in college or in a centre was discussed. These new



friendships could also be seen to assist in helping the women transition through difficult life changes such as starting college or work. P31 noted:

*I was...freaking out about the move to college and there being no-one around I knew that could help me if anything happened.....so when I did make friends with Deirdre and could talk to her about it all it made me feel a lot more at ease*

Making new friends in college allowed this interviewee to successfully transition to this new environment. Other interviews mentioned old friends also being a form of support at this time.

### **Support found in friendship**

A second overarching theme generated was the supportive nature of friendships. Support is seen as being valued, respected and loved by others and is known to decrease stress and promote health and wellbeing (Kugbey *et al.* 2015).

The first subtheme looked at the importance of the support of friends. While the timing of making friends is significant for creating lasting friendships the importance of these friendships can be seen through the discussion of support. P32 said when discussing her friends: “*So personally the support, to have the support is very, very important, do you know.*” Having the care and backing of friends is seen by this and many participants to be a vital area of her life.

Similar to helping facilitate transitions the support of friends can also be important for increasing independence. At this lifestage, friends become a larger portion of a person’s life and can take over roles previously filled by family as they grow in their independence. This can be seen in this quote by P31:

*Talking it to Deirdre was good because I used to have mam but she worries more than me so I wouldn't tell her so much now. I would only tell her when I have resolved a problem rather than when I'm going through it*

Having a close friend allowed this participant to gain independence that may otherwise not have occurred as P31 would have continued confiding only in family members.

Supportive friendships were also discussed as the emotional support given by trusted person that could decrease your worries surrounding your disability. For example, P31 said:

*I think you need others to get you out of thoughts that are dysfunctional the ones that make you feel like giving up because I know that Deirdre helps me focus on the good things in life and.... she helps me see my problems seem smaller than they are so I feel less overwhelmed by it..... the fact that she is there for me makes me feel less affected by it.*

These quotes highlight the ability of friends to decrease anxieties both for general life matters and those specific to disability. P23 also noted that support gained from family and friends increased her confidence in herself.

*I'm so lucky with the support I have like...maybe that gives me...an awful lot more confidence to kind of say what I want to say and be who I want to be, you know.*

Having a friend to rely on and confide in is seen in these findings to decrease anxiety and increase confidence.

A third subtheme was friendship with people who also have a disability. This was noted throughout the interviews both with individuals who had had the disability for their entire lives and those who had acquired one at a later stage. P27 stated:

*I did find a friend recently that also has epilepsy who got it at a roughly similar time as me which is a really good thing because it was actually nice to have somebody that I felt understood because I found that very hard.*

She found this emotional support valuable as she felt other friends didn't understand what she was going through with her disability. P53 discussed how she preferred having friends from the day service she attended. When asked why she felt more comfortable with this set of friends, P53 explained: "*As I'm with people who have the same as me, have a disability*". This woman felt more comfortable socially interacting with people who also have a

disability. Similarly, P91 discussed the need to support groups of people with her condition who are the same age:

*I wish there was more things for young people with MS...I would like to talk to young people at the same point of MS as I am because the elderly with MS they have their own experiences with MS... I couldn't relate to their experiences...I would like to know what's it like after college or how you'd get a job after MS or you know things like that*

Similar to the other women she feels having the support of people with a similar condition would help her to navigate difficult experiences in her life that she feels only they would understand. The support given by friendship can be seen in throughout these results to increase the participant's quality of life.

### **Friendship as a vehicle for occupation**

Friendship as an occupational facilitator constituted the final theme. Occupation in this context was seen as both socialising—an occupation itself—and also in the form of activities that these women may not have done by themselves such as going to the pub. In many of these interviews the only meaningful leisure occupations mentioned were those done with friends. P23 said when discussing her confidence:

*"I think more so the going to college and the whole social interaction of...going to the local pub and going for a game of snooker and you know it just kind of not being single out in that."*

Having friends to socialise with and taking part in meaningful occupation with friends has increased her confidence and enjoyment of life. P54 also discussed her only friend in the community.

*"I have a really good friend who lives down in the village...Yeah, he would either come up to my house or I would go down to his house or we would go somewhere and do an activity"*

Taking part in occupation with friends is mentioned in almost every interview which highlights its importance to the participants. Occupations mentioned were varied and include playing games, going for coffee, going on walks and going to the pub to name a few.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this research was to discover the importance of friendship for this cohort of women with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 30 and how they create these friendships.

The results presented two ways lasting friendships were created. The first was by establishing friendships as a child that last into adulthood. Research has described the importance of friendship in childhood for children both with and without disabilities (Wiener and Schneider 2002, Rosenbaum and Gorter 2012). It has also been shown that friendships that continue through the life span grow from casual to close relationships (Blieszner and Roberto 2004). The results found by this research agree with these findings. Childhood friends were described by the participants as valued and close relationships. Childhood friendships that endure over time have been shown to increase social acceptance and interaction for people with a disability across the lifespan (Howes 1983, Hurrelmann and Engel 1996). Having the opportunity to interact regularly with peers and friends helps to develop more lasting friendships for children with disabilities (Geisthardt *et al.* 2002). This is particularly important for creating meaningful friendships for those with cognitive impairments and could be seen in these findings (Salmon 2013).

The second way found in the results to create meaningful friendships is while transitioning into adulthood. During this transition, the young adult separates from the adolescent world and in particular from family (Sugarman, 2001). When transitioning to college or into centres participants of this research chose friends with similar interests who could support them through the transition. Research by Martínez Alemán (2010) also found the importance of the role of friendship in helping to facilitate a successful transition of young women with disabilities to greater independence and new stages in a their life such as college. Research about the friendships of people without disability similarly found the importance of new friendships in helping individuals to adjust to a new social environment, in particular the transition to higher level education (Buote *et al.* 2007).

The role of friendship in facilitating increased independence also occurred in the results when discussing the importance of friendship to the lives of young women with disabilities. Social support is defined as “information causing a person to believe that he is cared for, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations” (Cobb 1995). Friendship is a form of social support and it increases the quality of life for people both with and without a disability (Berkman and Glass 2000, Lippold and Burns 2009). Support in friendship has also been found to lead to more meaningful relationships (Laursen and Hartup 2002). Research by Demir and Weitekamp (2006) found that quality of friendship predicted happiness more so than quantity of friends. From this it can be assumed that while many people with disabilities may only have one or two friends that if these friendships are of a supportive and meaningful nature, as seen in the findings from this study, then they will achieve increased happiness (Bjarnason 2004). Bjarnason (2004) argued that one good friend could make a difference to the life of someone with disabilities and promote participation in society which was also seen in the findings of this research.

It was noted in research that people with disabilities often have friends that also have disabilities (Emerson and McVilly 2004). The findings from this research agreed with this and showed the importance of having friends with a similar disability in receiving support from someone who understands. While some research argues that friendship between those with a disability and without is the key factor to social integration (Green *et al.* 1995), Bjarnason (2004) found that friends who also have disabilities are preferred as they are able to feel more comfortable with them and better understood. It was discussed during one of the interviews in this research that while this participant had friends without a disability they wouldn't really be able to understand what she was going through and so she valued her friendship with someone who also had a disability.

The final theme discussed the importance of friendship in facilitating occupation. Meaningful activity is at the core of occupational therapy and the findings of this research clearly indicate the importance of friendship for participation in occupation or co-occupation. Co-occupation is when the occupation of one shapes the occupation of another and how they intertwine (Pierce 2009). Meaning and shared experience are important parts of co-occupation (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow 2009). The findings of this research paper are of particular importance when associated with research by McIntyre and Howie (2002) which found that active participation in meaningful activities with friends leads to a more fulfilling life. Throughout

the interviews participants of this study discussed sharing meaningful activities with friends. Everyday occupations such as going for a walk became a meaningful experience when shared with a friend. In accordance with these results, friendship has also been found to be of primary importance for participating in leisure activities and support in particular among younger people (Arnon *et al.* 2008). From the findings in this paper and other research it can be inferred that increased friendship could increase the participation in occupation by people with disabilities and lead to a better quality of life (McVilly *et al.* 2006)

### Limitations

A commonly cited limitation of qualitative research is the amount of subjectivity in the interpretation of the data (Carr 1994). However, mechanisms were included to address this. The development of the themes was cross-checked between peers and a supervisor who was familiar with the dataset. Also the analytical approach was rigorous and the findings are grounded in participants' own words. Thematic maps were also created to show the analytical process and increase dependability (Babbie 2011).

A further limitation of this research is the fact that the interviews were not completed by the person doing the analysis. This limitation was minimised as the interviews were completed by experienced researchers and field notes were available with each transcript. This also increases credibility as I had no involvement with the participants as the interviews were completed and transcribed and all data received was anonymous. During the analysis I also debriefed with my peers and supervisor to discuss decisions made and receive feedback.

Also this research reported the views and perceptions of 15 women with disabilities aged between 18 and 30. A larger sample of women with disabilities from across Ireland may have provide further and broader insight into the topic of friendship and disability. A longitudinal study could also be completed to look at the friendship of women with disabilities across the lifespan to give a broader overview of the topic and its importance to quality of life. The results of this research could also be used by other researchers to compare their experiences of friendship to other age groups or gender. It also highlighted the need for further research into the role of friendship in facilitating occupation and the different types of occupations associated with friendship.

### Recommendations for Practice

The research highlighted important factors that could be used in occupational therapy practice. An interesting aspect of the results of this research is the importance of childhood friends. This research shows the need for occupational therapists to consider what can be done to enhance children's opportunities to develop meaningful peer connections at a young age in order to encourage lifelong friendships. Being involved in peer group activities should be considered an important part of the intervention process. Discussions with parents, from the beginning of any intervention, could include providing information about the importance of this aspect of children's lives, and provide parents with ideas and options about how to address this successfully.

The results also indicated that friendship can help people with disabilities successfully transition to new social environments. A potential clinical application of this knowledge is that when occupational therapists are creating interventions for clients based on transitioning to school, college, work or other environments it may be beneficial to focus on facilitating new friendships. Peer groups could also be set up to allow information exchange and peer support to facilitate successful transitions.

The results also highlight the need for disability support groups or peer activity groups for specific ages to be set up. This is due to the fact that they will better understand each other's experiences and be able to support each other around specific difficulties or opportunities. These groups could also be used to facilitate occupation with clients. Similar to the results found by McIntyre and Howie (2002) these results illustrate to occupational therapists the need to encourage their clients to engage in meaningful occupations with their friends or other peers.

### Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how women between the ages of 18 and 30 with a disability created and maintained lasting friendships and the importance of friendship to their lives. The findings revealed creating friendships at particular points in your life, such as childhood or when transitioning to a new environment, can lead to lasting friendships. The importance of lasting friendships was found in the findings to be the support gained by friends and how it facilitates meaningful occupation. Occupational therapists could use these findings to

influence their practice in a variety of ways. These include encouraging peer relations from a young age in the form of peer group activities. It also highlighted the use of friendship in facilitating transitions for people with disabilities. A focus on the social skills necessary to make new friends could be part of a successful intervention for clients transitioning to new environments. Finally, the results highlight the role of friendship in facilitating occupation. In practice, understanding about how people with disabilities participate in occupation can enhance the client-centred and evidence-based nature of occupational therapy services.



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