

## *Supporting Friendships: One Parent's Reflections*

BY PAT AMOS

Sometimes the most low-tech and fragile things turn out to be the most complex and powerful. Friendship is one of those surprising phenomena. What could be easier than to be or have a friend? It's not rocket science, it's not even home economics. No instruction manuals or directions are required. Yet any person who has had difficulty doing the dance of relationships, and any parent who has agonized over how to help a lonely child, comes to understand that friendship is not just an expendable treat.

Friendship is less like "the frosting on the cake," and more like an essential organic compound that fuels our development. It also stubbornly resists our attempts to engineer synthetic versions. When a friendship begins to form, we may feel awe or even fear over its apparent fragility and our lack of power to confirm or control it. Yet that friendship may weather the severest storms and endure down through the years.

I want to offer a short anecdote about my own son, who was born in the year that the federal right-to-education law (PL 94-142) took effect, and who was diagnosed with autism a few years later. Rather than sifting his school experiences for overly specific (and therefore dubious) dos and don'ts, however, I'd like to wax philosophical about the broader lessons that we learned from his friendships.

Like so many of his generation, my son started school in a segregated program for students sharing his label. It took time for our family to realize the limitations of this approach to the education of children with disabilities, and to secure his place in an inclusive setting. By seventh grade my son had enjoyed two

years of inclusion in a small school, and was entering our large public middle school. Would the other students like him? Would they even accept him? We decided to pursue at least one of the many afterschool activities as a way of establishing his arrival. We also decided that after listening to the school's annual presentation on "Clubs and Sports," he would make his own selection.

Well, he did. "I like science," he announced that afternoon, "so I will join....the Science Olympics." Now the Science Olympics was a highly competitive team populated by the top crop of honors students, that fabulous 1% of the student body who were already planning for early admissions to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. My son was in the science class that was still petitioning to be allowed to use a microscope. However, I had promised to support his decision and there was no way to go except forward. I suggested that he ask to see the teacher who ran the Science Olympics team, and explain why he wanted to join. An appointment with the teacher was made.

The day my son was to keep this appointment I promised to bring the car and wait outside for him, since the school bus would be missed. There I sat, heart pounding and white knuckles grasping the steering wheel, feeling that we were headed straight for a crash despite the fact that the car was parked. After what seemed an endless interval my son strolled out of the building and eased into the back seat, his usual poker face giving away nothing. "Well? Well? What did he say?" I prompted. "I'm on the team," my son replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

My son became the team's set-up person and a sort of general motivator and promoter. Although he did not compete in the actual timed events at competitions, he attended everything and made himself invaluable. That year our Middle School Science Olympics team won the State Championship. My son was there in his team shirt, was photographed with the trophy, chugged soda at the victory party, and was lauded by the School Board. He had friends on the team, and such was his new status that he attracted friends off the team. He had arrived.

He continued with the Science Olympics all through middle school and high school, and although the team never won the state championship again, they came close. My son decided that his teammates were giving in to too many non-scientific distractions, and doubled his efforts to assure that everyone attended practices. He fanned the flames of team spirit to the very end of his senior year. When the students celebrated their impending graduation with a special Science Olympics party, the teacher who first accepted him awarded him a plaque: "For the student who was the heart and soul of this team."

On graduation day, my son joined the procession to the stage and walked along the receiving line of school dignitaries and honored scholars, shaking the hand of each in turn, until he came to the school's top student, the winner of a Presidential Scholarship to M.I.T....and his friend from the Science Olympics. This young man stepped forward from the receiving line and, in front of the entire crowd in the packed auditorium, embraced my son.

This heartfelt experience taught my family many things that we might not otherwise have realized. As I write this, my son is 27-years-old, and I am working as a consultant to other people with disabilities and their families. I find that when I rely on the following "working principles," wonderful things continue to happen for him and for the other young people I serve:

1. **The bonding strength of common interests.** People often respond with greater confidence and comfort when they are asked to include someone in a specific, mutually enjoyed activity than when faced with a more nebulous request to befriend that person. Since friendship doesn't appear or grow in a vacuum, it is difficult to contemplate in the abstract. When people are supported to pursue a common interest directly, friendships may develop tangentially out of that interest.
2. **The power of the personal request.** Whenever possible, it is more effective for our children to take the initiative and request to be included than to have an intermediary do the job. Asking is so simple to do, yet too

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*Continued from page 4*

often we parents become discouraged, and may inadvertently discourage our children, due to fear of rejection. We forget how amazingly well many people rise to an occasion when they are approached directly and personally. We need to model and teach our children, at an early age, the simple behavior of asking to join in.

3. **The dignity of giving rather than receiving.** A friend of mine, diagnosed with autism many decades ago, once complained to me, "Why am I always in the box marked 'receive' and never in the box marked 'give'?" A great deal of special help, programs, and supports had been organized for her over the years, yet she was often very unhappy. It turned out that she was yearning for the dignity of having others share their problems with her, ask her advice, and accept her comfort. If we are to support true friendships for our children, we need to help them find ways to give to others and to be valued in that role.

4. **The right to pursue big dreams.** We start out on the right foot when we honor what each person likes best, and don't feel limited in our choice of activities. Every activity, no matter how specialized it may seem or what a developed set of skills it may appear to require, contains (sometimes hidden) opportunities for an enthusiastic neophyte to make a contribution and come to be valued as a friend.

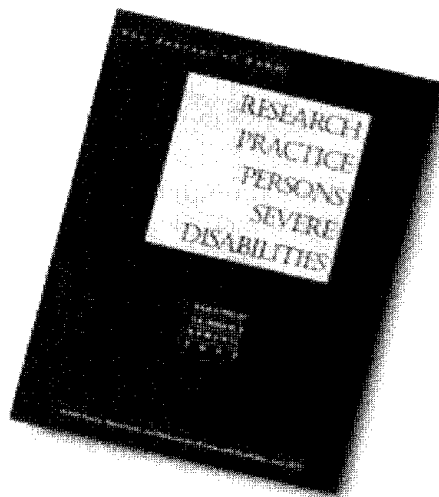
5. **The effectiveness of learning by doing.** Since friendship doesn't grow in a vacuum, we should remind ourselves that neither do social skills. Rather than expecting our children to spend their time tediously "getting ready" for the "real world," we should be supporting them to live and learn in it now. Fortunately, social opportunities come in diverse shapes and sizes. Children who dislike open-ended situations may be attracted to more scripted activities, groups that hold formal meetings, or

classmates who prize specialized routines and knowledge. Whatever the setting, when motivation is high, all of us absorb more social skills from each other than we could ever learn by direct instruction.

6. **The acceptance of unpredictability and surprises as part of life.** We can plan for hospitable, open situations in which friendships may take root, but beyond that we can neither predict nor assure nor control their growth. We should accept that fact, and not dishonor our children and friends by presuming to micromanage their social lives.

7. **The determination to “be there” and stake a claim to a community.** Just being there -- showing up regularly -- as an ongoing part of a particular community of people, is vitally important in building the basis for friendships. People who “come and go” have great difficulty in being seen as real members of a classroom or community. They are perceived differently and, although there may be no harmful intent, group members often interpret a fluctuating presence as a message that this person belongs elsewhere and does not require their personal investment. People need to be visible in their schools and communities on an ongoing basis. Presence is a powerful statement of belonging, commitment, and availability to befriend and to be a friend.

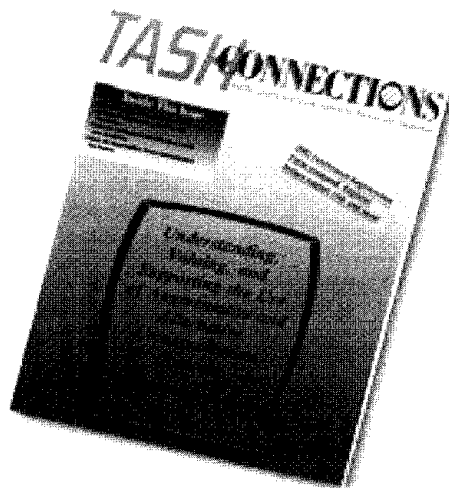
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