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# Befriending

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## More than just finding friends?

### SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Despite the growing trend for the development of befriending services, there is a paucity of research evidence about the effectiveness of such services. This is in the light of government recognition that the provision of short-break services (of which befriending is one of the range of services) is essential for supporting families. These three factors have prompted this research, which focuses on the views and experiences of 15 workers at seven befriending schemes for children and/or adults with learning difficulties in England; 34 people with learning difficulties using the schemes; 42 befrienders attached to them; and 46 parent carers of children/young people linked to any of the seven schemes. The interviews revealed that:

- Most schemes were unable to meet the demand for befrienders.
- The most effective method of recruiting new volunteer befrienders was word of mouth.
- Each of the seven schemes had a different approach to the procedure for the assessment of volunteers.
- All but one of the befriending services provided mandatory preparatory training for befrienders.
- Matching potential befriendees and befrienders was usually done on the basis of the befriender's preferences and interests. Befriendees were not usually given options in the same way.
- Some of the befriendees wanted to do new and different things.
- All but one of the befriendees said that they thought their befriender was a good friend to them.
- Over a quarter of the befrienders thought that they were out of pocket because of their befriending activities.
- Many befriendees and their families felt let down and disappointed at the end of a befriending partnership.
- Just one of the seven services mentioned that they formally reviewed every link once a year.
- Many befrienders seemed to get a lot themselves from being a befriender. Some of the most commonly reported challenges mentioned were: dealing with some forms of behaviour, the physically demanding nature of the work, and the maintenance of motivation and enthusiasm.

## **Background**

Befriending is commonly described as acting as a friend to a person. Yet whilst the offer and provision of friendship is a key element of befriending, there are two other elements to befriending that distinguish it from 'friendship': firstly, the involvement of a formal service provider, and secondly, the purposive nature of the relationship between the individuals concerned. In general, befriending is a service that aims to help people increase their friendship circles.

Although befriending is generally seen as being a 'good thing' and is thought to be effective, there are few studies providing definitive evidence of this, particularly in relation to people with learning difficulties. This is despite government recognition that such services are essential for supporting families of children with learning difficulties (DoH, 1998; DoH/SSI, 1998a; DoH/SSI, 1998b; DoH, 2001a), and the government's commitment to providing quality services for people with learning difficulties that promote independence, choice and inclusion (DoH, 2001b).

## **The research**

The study sought to obtain the views and experiences of the different people involved with seven befriending schemes for children and/or adults with learning difficulties in a variety of locations throughout England. Four of the schemes provided a service for children and young people up to the age of 18, one covered the transition period with youngsters aged from 14-25, and two provided a befriending service for adults.

Interviews were held with: 15 workers at the seven befriending schemes, 34

people with learning difficulties using any of the seven befriending schemes, 42 befrienders attached to any of the seven schemes and 46 parent carers of children/young people linked to any of the seven schemes.

## **The recruitment and preparation of befrienders**

Each of the seven befriending schemes actively recruited new volunteer befrienders, using a variety of methods. The most effective method seemed to be word of mouth, with almost a third of the befrienders saying that this was how they heard about befriending opportunities. Most schemes were unable to meet the demand for befrienders.

Each of the seven schemes also had a different approach to the procedure for the assessment of volunteers. Two used detailed application and assessment procedures. The other five services undertook an interview with the prospective befriender, and most took up personal references and undertook a number of statutory checks of police and social services records. There was an almost unanimous agreement on the part of the parents whose youngsters used a befriending service about the need for such checks on befrienders working with disabled children and adults.

All but one of the befriending services provided mandatory preparatory training for befrienders. The length and depth of these training courses varied considerably. The topics that the most befrienders could remember being covered in their training were disability awareness training, and an exploration of their own values and attitudes. Almost all of the befrienders who received some training judged it to be 'very useful' or 'useful'.

## **The matching of befrienders and befriendees**

Most of the befriending schemes obtained information about potential befriendees from a referral agency, such as social services. They had become aware of the skills, interests and preferences of the potential befrienders from their preparation and training sessions. However, matching potential befriendees and befrienders was usually done on the basis of the befriender's preferences and interests, with or without other factors such as availability, ethnicity, age, the area in which they lived and whether the befriender was a car driver or not. Befrienders were generally given a personal profile of their potential befriender and had an opportunity to choose whether or not to go ahead with befriending the person that was suggested. Befriendees were not usually given options in the same way.

## **Current befriending arrangements**

A wide range of activities was described by befrienders, service providers, befriendees and the parents of young people using the befriending services. Even so, some of the befriendees wanted to do new and different things. Half of all activities mentioned were home-based or activities in the community where interaction with others was unlikely to take place. For youngsters linked with group befriending schemes, a narrower range of activities was on offer than for befriendees linked to one-to-one befrienders.

Two-thirds of the befrienders said that they had encountered one or more difficulties when they were out with the person they befriended. The most commonly stated difficulties were the 'inappropriate' behaviour of the befriender, and the attitude of the

public towards the befriender. Befrienders reported using a range of techniques to resolve difficulties, both at the time they occurred and subsequently, and most befrienders seemed to think that they were reasonably well equipped to deal with them. Of further concern was that over a quarter of the befrienders thought they were out of pocket because of their befriending activities.

Most parents of befriendees were satisfied with the current arrangements for their son or daughter. Those that were not satisfied mentioned the reasons as being: the infrequency or unpredictability of meetings, transport difficulties, the presence of a third party at meetings, the use of segregated services, too much emphasis on one activity, or a maximum age limit for the service.

## **The relationships involved**

All but one of the befriendees said that they thought their befriender was a good friend to them. In addition, all but one of the befrienders said that the relationship with the person they were linked to worked well for them.

## **When befriending links end**

It is clear that the befriending relationships gave rise to intense feelings, particularly on the part of the befriendees. However, many befriendees and their families felt let down and disappointed at the end of a befriending partnership. There were no instances when befriendees who had had a previous link could recall someone from the services talking to them about the link ending or asking how they had felt about it.

## Monitoring, reviewing and evaluating the work of the schemes

Some of the befriending services had a formal monitoring system, while others did not. Just one of the seven services mentioned that they formally reviewed every link once a year, in order to check that the service users still needed the service. Almost a third of befrienders had not received a copy of the organisation's Equal Opportunities Policy, and none of the services had considered the possibility of befrienders being disabled people themselves.

## The joys and challenges of being a befriender

Many befrienders seemed to get a lot themselves from their befriending relationship and all but one of the befrienders said that they would recommend befriending to a friend. Most befrienders were very committed and intended to still be befriending for the foreseeable future, although there was more instability with younger volunteers who were a more mobile group. Generally, intense relationships developed between the befrienders and befriendees.

## References

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