

FRIENDS for Life: Learning disabilities - adaptations

Background



1. What is FRIENDS for Life?

FRIENDS for Life is a group programme that teaches children and young people techniques to cope with anxiety and promote wellbeing, social and emotional skills and resilience. The programme was developed in Australia by Professor Paula Barrett, from a previously strong evidence-base for effective anxiety interventions designed by Professor Phillip Kendall in the USA.

It is usually delivered in school-based groups. There are FRIENDS programmes for a range of children and young people:

- Fun FRIENDS for 4-6 year olds
- FRIENDS for Life for 8-10 year olds
- FRIENDS for Life Youth for teenagers
- "Strong not tough" to develop adult resilience in parents and teachers
- Special FRIENDS for children and young people on the autistic spectrum, aged 9-13 years – published in 2015 in UK

FRIENDS for Life is the only programme of its kind endorsed by the World Health Organisation, as "efficacious across the entire spectrum, as a universal prevention program, as a targeted prevention program and as a treatment".

Research on the programme shows reduced anxiety and depression, increased coping skills and self-esteem, with improvements maintained up to 6 years after the completion of the programme. (Barrett 2006; Stallard et al. 2007, 2014). Some evidence (see section 3) has

shown positive effects with children and young people with special needs when appropriate adaptations or “reasonable adjustments” are made (Thompson & Lonsdale, 2008; Mullin 2010; Slack, 2013).

FRIENDS for Life enables children to learn a range of skills, including how to:

- Identify “anxiety increasing” thoughts and to replace them with more helpful thoughts
- Identify anxious (and other difficult) feelings and learn to manage them
- Learn to overcome problems rather than avoid them.

Now in its sixth edition, FRIENDS for Life incorporates resilience and mindfulness into its social-emotional-developmental and cognitive behavioural framework. The Pathways Health and research website (<http://pathwayshrc.com.au/international-partners/>) provides further information on the programme and cites research, including studies describing developments to ensure FRIENDS for Life reaches socially and economically disadvantaged and indigenous communities.

FRIENDS for Life builds skills using the FRIENDS mnemonic:

F	Feelings
R	Remember to relax
I	I can do it, I can try
E	Explore solutions and coping step-plans
N	Now reward yourself, you’ve done your best
D	Do practice
S	Smile, stay calm, use your support networks

2. Why are the FRIENDS for Life: Learning Disabilities adaptations important?

Although children and young people with learning disabilities have higher rates of emotional and behavioural problems than their peers without learning disabilities, research shows that they have less access to services and support (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities 2002; Emerson and Hatton 2007). Numbers of children and young people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities are increasing (Carpenter et al., 2011; Blackburn et al., 2010) with increased survival of low birth weight babies, and a rise in foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (<http://complexld.ssatrust.org.uk>).

The [Equality Act 2010](#) states that the NHS, education, social care and voluntary sectors should all provide services across a range of disabilities, including learning disabilities. Recent policy and legislation - Future in Mind, Transforming Care, NICE, Building the Right Support, Children and Families Act and SEND Code of Practice all emphasise the need for early, coordinated multiagency interventions. Research into effective interventions is urgently needed.

The Foundation’s initial **FRIENDS for Life – Learning Disabilities** development project adapted the internationally recognised “FRIENDS for Life” programme to be accessible for children and young people with learning disabilities. The adaptations were based on relevant research, expert opinion, our own combined experience (75+ years!) and feedback from pupils, families and session leaders. This was the first step before the feasibility of the adapted FRIENDS for Life can be systematically evaluated and pilot trials to measure effectiveness can be planned.

In 2016, an NHS England “Transforming Care for Children” grant enabled us to run training events for professionals and parents in Special FRIENDS (Barrett, Smith and Slack, 2015), and our further adaptations so it can be accessible and appropriate for children and young people with more substantial cognitive and communication impairments. This grant has “kick started” a Community of Practice so that practice, development and evaluation can be shared.



3. Current evidence base

In addition to extensive research into the effectiveness of FRIENDS for Life in Australia (Barrett 2006, Anticich 2013), research by Professor Paul Stallard (Stallard et al. 2007, 2014) demonstrated the appropriateness and effectiveness of FRIENDS for Life in schools across England. Liddle’s 2009 investigation found similar benefits from Fun FRIENDS and FRIENDS for Life in schools and nurseries in Scotland, whilst Rodgers and Dunsmuir’s 2013 study in Ireland demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety levels and positive gains in young people’s emotional wellbeing following delivery of the FRIENDS for Life programme in post-primary schools.

A study in England (Thompson & Lonsdale 2008) delivered FRIENDS for Life to children with literacy difficulties and SEN in a mainstream school. Following this, ratings of anxiety and behavioural difficulties decreased and they found that a collaboration of staff from the school and CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) could deliver FRIENDS for Life successfully, with some adaptations to increase accessibility.

Mullin described in her 2010 study the effects of implementing FRIENDS for Life in two special schools. These schools supported children with a variety of special educational needs, including autism, Asperger’s syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyspraxia, and learning, speech and language difficulties. Findings indicated that, following participation in FRIENDS for Life, anxiety was reduced and there were improvements in other measures of anger and disruptive behaviour.

Slack’s (2013) doctoral research investigated the effects of an adaptation of FRIENDS for Life with a small group (n=4) of nine to eleven year olds with autism and some learning difficulties. Outcomes demonstrated a significant decrease in anxiety from baseline to follow-up on at least one weekly measure of anxiety, indicating a delayed effect on anxiety (Slack, 2013).

Rossiter, Andrews & Tulloch (2011) found that children and young people with severe learning disabilities could participate in a similar group to FRIENDS for Life, if activities were simplified, visualised and other creative approaches were used, such as sensory stories. More recent studies have shown that adapted Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) delivered individually or in groups with people with learning disabilities can reduce anxiety, depression and anger/aggression (Hassiotis et al., 2013 ; Willner et al., 2013)

It follows, therefore, that adapting an existing well-evidenced approach, such as FRIENDS for Life, has the potential to both improve the emotional wellbeing and reduce the anxiety of children and young people with learning disabilities.

For further information on the original FRIENDS for Life programme please see:

<http://pathwayshrc.com.au/international-partners>.

For information on what we did and what we learned through our initial development and adaptation project, and the NHS England grant supported training and Community of Practice development (January – March 2016), please see: <http://www.fpld.org.uk/our-work/health-well-being/friends-for-life>.

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The initial background paper was written by Rowena Rossiter, Jill Davies (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities), Jane Woodrow (CAMHS-LD Family Intensive Support Service in Sussex Partnership Foundation Trust), Helen Mackay and Katherine Lewis (Hazel Court School). This version has been updated by Rowena and Jill.

Our broader FRIENDS for Life – Learning Disabilities Development Research Team includes Professor Paul Stallard (University of Bath), Professor Glyn Murphy (Tizard Centre, University of Kent) and Dr Nicky Wood, East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust. The Research Team oversees research planning for a formal feasibility study and funding. We have links with Professor Barrett who will advise on fidelity and integrity with existing FRIENDS programmes and help support international links and interest.

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