

Friends & Inclusion

Five Approaches to
Building Relationships

Peggy Hutchison & John Lord
with Karen Lord



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Preface

The importance of relationships cannot be overstated. However, our busy and often complex lives leave little time or energy for developing relationships that are integral to a nurturing society. Many people, such as those with disabilities, often have to be so concerned about meeting their basic needs that they can devote little time to relationships. Arguably, many people in Canadian and other western societies are at risk of slipping through the cracks, and experiencing social isolation and alienation. The reason for writing this book is to address this issue and to propose some solutions to this problem.

People who are at risk are often seen by the public, community organizations, and families as first and foremost needing services and the help of professionals. While this response is sometimes useful, it can impede the development of meaningful friendships. Our society for the most part still assumes that people with disabilities mostly require services rather than a rich life in community with friends.

The opportunity to have real friends occurs through participation in family, school, neighbourhoods, and other places where people gather. Real friendships are genuine caring relationships where people share common interests, love and respect each other, and want to spend time together. Contrary to the idea that these kinds of friendships can only happen naturally, our experience is that discovering and building real friendships often requires intentional or deliberate action.

For some people, a textured life rich with friends is like a beautifully woven cloth. The impression initially might be that there is certain simplicity but closer examination reveals a complexity. The color, design, and the grain are all orchestrated in a way that brings wonder. This fabric has been created intentionally because of a dream, creativity, and persistence.

This book reflects on the question of friendship first in the context of broader society and second specifically with regard to our daughter, Karen Lord. This book is written from a parent and family perspective by Karen's parents, Peggy Hutchison and John Lord. As her family, we continually grow in our understanding of the importance of inclusion and friendships to a good quality of life. We believe that Karen has a right to a good quality of life. We think

this can only be achieved through an inclusive life. Inclusion means that Karen is included fully in her community, has the opportunity to grow to her fullest, has choice and self-determination, and is free from discrimination.



Karen with her extended family at the family cottage

Our daughter has always lived an inclusive life. As a child, she lived with us in a housing co-op that was participatory, where she was very involved in her neighbourhood. She attended a co-operative day care centre and public school with her siblings. Karen joined community activities, from Brownies to

residential camp. These opportunities provided the foundation for beginning to live a full, inclusive life with relationships at the core.

As Karen grew to adulthood, her broad vocational interests, from day care teacher to cafe worker, contributed immensely to this full life. Living with people of her choice or on her own has been important to her becoming her own person. Making a contribution through singing in her church choir, playing in a community band, and working as a certified yoga instructor have all been central to her experiencing an inclusive life as a full citizen in the community of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. Karen's immediate and extended family plays an active role in her life. Karen receives support from family and friends as well as from individualized funding that enables her to create her own path.

Friendships are central to this vision of inclusion. The power of friendship for belonging cannot be overestimated. We know that friends and relationships are vital for self-esteem, dreams, participation, social support, and citizenship. Since Karen was a young child, we have intentionally worked on relationship building at every stage of her life. This has not always been easy but being aware of different approaches to building friendships has helped immensely with this

process. We want to share with you what we have learned about friendship and the diverse approaches that can be used.

We do this by first an introduction to the topic. An introductory chapter will address why friendships are important, their connection to inclusion, and details about our personal experience. Next, five chapters outlining major approaches to friendship development, one for each approach to relationship building will follow. With each approach, we provide a definition; background and history according to the literature; strategies we have found important over the years as utilized with Karen; a summary of the potential of the approach, and a few resources for exploring these topics in greater depth. Detailed notes or references for each of these chapters appear at the end of the book. Finally, a concluding chapter draws conclusions by highlighting several themes that cross all five approaches to building relationships.

Finally, a word about the writing of this book is important here. This book is meant for people with disabilities, family members, and other people interested in building friendships within an inclusion framework. The intention of this book is not to offer a recipe to follow but rather to build interest in friendship as it relates to inclusion.

We got started with this idea based on some presentations we were doing. Over several years, Peggy and Karen developed and delivered a powerpoint presentation on these five approaches to building friendship that was shared with others. Karen understands the framework of inclusive friendships because she lives it. This has been presented in several places: Peggy’s 4th year class on inclusion at Brock University; the Facilitation Leadership Group; Plan Lifetime Networks in Kitchener; a recent conference of the Canadian Association for Community Living in Toronto; and the “You’ve Gotta Have Friends” Conference in Langley, British Columbia.



Karen and Peggy presenting in Langley BC at the “You’ve Gotta Have Friends Conference”

Peggy Hutchison and John Lord raised the idea of turning presentation ideas and other experiences related to friendship into a book with Karen. Karen was thrilled. After each draft was written, Karen and Peggy went through the manuscript for Karen's feedback and agreement on what had been written. It was important to know that Karen felt she was fairly and accurately portrayed.

We then sent the book out to a few academic and non-academic reviewers. We want to thank Charlottle Dingwall, Theron Kramer, Krista Lord, Sarah Lord, Kathryn MacKay, Erin Sharpe, and Amber Zimmerman for their helpful comments on drafts of this book.

Introduction:

Friends and Inclusion

Why Friends?

Friendships are an important aspect of all our lives. Immeasurable benefits result from having friends, depending on the meaning we attach to the concept and the depth of the relationships. Some widely agreed upon benefits of meaningful relationships include:¹

- § providing companionship for people of all ages.
- § playing a role in identity development, autonomy, and self-esteem.
- § presenting peers who can have a positive influence.
- § experiencing social support.
- § playing a preventive role in health related issues

such as obesity, smoking, isolation or dementia.

§ creating a foundation for the development of romantic relationships.

§ being an important ingredient in the kind of world we want to create.

§ and establishing a part of being a valued citizen.

These broadly accepted benefits of friendships have not been applied to people with disabilities. This oversight is detrimental for meaningful inclusion and equality of persons with disabilities. Fortunately, some recent frameworks of disability have included the importance of relationships. Friendships are increasingly seen as vital to growth and development and personal well-being, whether in mental health, independent living, or community living movements.

Friends and Inclusion

The idea that friendship is an important part of building inclusive lives has been recognized for some time.² We want to build on the reasons already established and outlined on the importance of friendship. However, we want to re-look at friendship from the angle of the person with a disability.

Friends provide companionship for doing things in the community. Many people with disabilities associate mainly with their parents, other persons with disabilities, volunteers, or staff. These tendencies raise questions on the degree of inclusion experienced by people with disabilities. We know that having a broad group of friends opens doors to communities of people, enables people to overcome feelings of loneliness associated with isolation, and allows for more spontaneity. Taken together, these benefits make inclusion more possible.³

Closely related to the companionship idea, is the fact that friends can potentially enable people to venture out into the world. Friends provide security, confidence, and channels for trying out things in the community. Venturing out might feel frightening simply because of the unknown. Or it might seem intimidating if the person has been overprotected and been denied opportunities other people take for granted. Taking risks to try new things and doing this in a supported context are very important for building an inclusive life. Friendships have potential for helping to make this happen.⁴

Friends also help a person with a disability learn about him or herself. Many people need support in exploring questions that will build autonomy and an

inclusive life in the community. Who am I? What are my dreams? How do I feel about myself? In large part, it is friends that make this kind of exploration possible, being role models and mentors, providing peer feedback, and placing value on the person's thoughts and dreams. Friends also have the opportunity to learn more about their own strengths. These kinds of interpersonal experiences increase acceptance of diversity in our communities and contributes to citizenship.⁵

Strong bonds of friendship is known to be a strong determinant of health. We are healthier when we have meaningful friendships and relationships in our lives. A recent summary of research on this question shows that “people’s health depends on the quality of their social relationships.”⁶

Finally, friends are important to building inclusive lives because they provide social support. This support may be practical around issues like transportation or finances. Or it might include moral support when a serious crisis arises in a person’s life such as the support given by friends when someone becomes ill or dies.⁷ Support is often ongoing and a two way street. When support goes both ways, the so-called receiver of support learns along the way and is able to return gifts in ways that are very meaningful for others.

Inclusive Settings

The importance of friendships has been explored within diverse community settings. One finding is that many children with disabilities who attend regular classrooms in their neighbourhood school benefit in many ways, one of which is friendships.⁸ ‘Regular’ throughout this book means participation in generic community settings that are used by citizens without disabilities. Similarly, people in regular and supported employment find they are able to develop new friends with people without disabilities.⁹ Children and adults, who are part of regular, inclusive community recreation, including inclusive camps, are more likely to make friends.¹⁰

In summary, we suggest that “Texture” be used as a metaphor for friendships in an inclusive life.¹¹ Like the texture in a beautiful fabric, people, in order to have full, inclusive lives require all the things we take for granted in a ‘good life.’ Like a good piece of cloth, people with disabilities require lots of intricately woven threads. People require meaningful relationships, connections to the community, and opportunities for participating and contributing.¹²

Our Experience

We have come to recognize five main approaches to building an inclusive life through friendships experienced in the life of our daughter Karen Lord. Karen was adopted into the Hutchison-Lord household at the age of 3 ½.



*Karen's photo in newspaper column
"Today's Child" – love at first sight!*

Discussions about efforts to build friendships with Karen began during these early years together. Now an adult with a 'textured' life, this feels like the right time to reflect on the role of friendships in Karen's life and how they were facilitated.

Not coincidentally, our commitment to inclusion began before Karen joined our family. We were already involved with teaching, research, and writing in the area of integration, as it was called in the late 70's, in opposition to segregation. Our first work together, as work and life partners, was a book called *Recreation Integration*, which became a foundation for our later work on inclusion.¹³ We furthered this work in the 80's and 90's through a community-based research organization we founded in Kitchener. The centre continues today with its focus on citizen participation, diversity, and inclusion. Peggy contributed during this time by bringing in her research from an academic context.

From the onset, it is important to emphasize that supporting Karen to build friendships and have an inclusive life has not been easy. Some readers may come to the conclusion that our ideas do not apply to a friend or someone they work with because the person does not have Karen's assets. Raising expectations has rewarding results.

It is true that Karen may seem like an exception today, but this was not always the case. The doctors told Karen's birth family that she was severely handicapped and they proceeded to give her up for adoption. We met Karen at 3 ½ in a foster home where

she spent most of her time in a playpen, ate baby food, and was unable to walk or use the toilet. We were told that these were Karen's limitations. We were suspicious.

Our family treated Karen as a 3 ½ year old and not as a baby and from the onset began raising expectations and providing support for an inclusive life. We recognize that some people with disabilities have higher support needs, but we believe that



*Karen with her new brother Jesse
and sister Krista*

friendships are essential and possible for every person and enhance the lives of all, no matter what the severity of disability.

A final caution on a different note is needed here. In regards to the five approaches to friendship building, it is very easy for all of us to end up using each approach as a technique or tool. This can be a problem because a focus on tools can limit a broader understanding that is required to build friendships. One of the ways we have safeguarded this from happening has been to always have a goal for Karen's life in the forefront. A clear goal or better stated, a dream, can help us stay focused on 'community' and 'good process.' Our dream for Karen was and is to have the best possible quality of life and we have always strongly believed that this could only happen through an inclusive life of relationships.

Karen's thoughts on her own friendships in the quotations below reflect how her own dreams for friends have been fulfilled.

I have lots of friends.

I like friends who are outgoing.

I like friends who are good listeners.

My friends help me have a good life in the community.

I do lots of stuff with my friends like go to their house for dinner, do yoga together, drumming, go for coffee, and sharing with their kids.

I feel happy when I am with my friends. I feel joyful when I spend time with my close friends.

I like people and being with people. I talk with new people who are nice and friendly. And then sometimes we become friends.

Karen

Resources

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