

# What Friendship Mentors Need to Know



Friendship  
MINISTRIES



Friendship Ministries is an interdenominational, international ministry for people with intellectual disabilities. Through consultation and with the help of resources that encourage spiritual development and relationships, Friendship Ministries helps churches to include people with intellectual disabilities in fellowship and service as members of the body of Christ.

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### Contact Us

We welcome your comments.

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## Mentors and Friends

The mission of Friendship Ministries is to *share God's love with people who have intellectual disabilities and to enable them to become an active part of God's family*. In line with this mission, the greatest impact in this ministry takes place in the relationships that develop between mentors and friends.

Whether you're a first-time or seasoned mentor, we hope this resource will supply you with helpful answers to frequently asked questions about Friendship mentoring. Our goal is to help you and your friends with intellectual disabilities grow together in love for each other and in service to God.

## What Does a Friendship Mentor Do?

Mentors form lasting relationships with friends as they interact together during Friendship sessions and other events. It's especially during one-on-one time at Friendship sessions that friends and mentors grow together in their love for God and each other. During this time, mentors

- review a Bible story with their friend.
- together with their friend apply the Bible's truth to their own lives.
- facilitate participation and ensure safety.

Leader/mentor guides include step-by-step plans for one-on-one mentoring time, questions for review, ideas for crafts and service projects, etc. See your group leader for more information about leader/mentor guides.

## What Is a Typical Friendship Program Like?

Friendship programs come in a variety of shapes and sizes, depending on their church sponsors, their community, how they wish to operate, etc. The most common Friendship gathering includes a group session followed by a time for friends and mentors to meet in small groups--ideally one-on-one.

A typical 60- to 90-minute Friendship session may include several activities like this:

- Greeting each other; welcome
- Group Session
  - Praise and worship
  - Prayer
  - Bible story
- One-on-One mentoring
  - Review and response
- Social time with refreshments

Regardless of how local programs are set up, an *atmosphere of acceptance* is the key to their success. Families tell us again and again that Friendship is a place where their family member with intellectual disabilities feels welcome. Mentors too feel lifted up spiritually and emotionally.

### What Are Our Friends Like?

You'll find that your Friendship group is as diverse as any other group in your church. While the youth and adult friends in your group have intellectual disabilities, they vary widely in

- degree of impairment.
- presence of physical disabilities.
- social skills.
- gifts and talents.
- emotional and spiritual maturity.
- life experiences.
- communication skills (for more information, see our webinar on mentoring high-need friends at [friendship.org](http://friendship.org)).

Our friends are real people who happen to have a disability.

- They may live with their families, in a group home with supportive care, or independently in their own home.
- They may attend school, or they may work in supportive settings or at a job site.

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Each friend is a one-of-a-kind person created in God's image.

- Friends are people like you and me with likes and dislikes, joys and sorrows.
- Friends have spiritual gifts to share with the body of Christ.

### Tips for Working with Friends

The number-one qualification for mentors is that they have a love for people and a desire to share God's love. Mentors come from all kinds of backgrounds and have a variety of gifts that God uses in amazing ways. While getting to know your friends is often the best source of information about them, here are some general tips that mentors find helpful in working with friends.

#### Respecting Friends as Individuals

Friendship Ministries emphasizes friendship and mutuality—we're learning and growing together. To show respect,

- affirm your friend as an individual who has worthy opinions, desires, and feelings.
- treat adults like adults by addressing them as adults and by selecting activities that relate to an adult's world of work and leisure.
- give help only when asked; do not assume that help is needed or desired.
- allow time for your friend to make his or her own decisions.
- accept your friend's work, showing that you believe your friend is capable.
- be sensitive to special needs such as medical issues and dietary needs that require attention during your friend's time at Friendship.

#### Enabling Friends to Learn the Way They Learn Best

Although learning may be a challenge for most of your friends, they may surprise you with their enthusiasm and understanding. It will help to remember some points like these:

- **Friends are concrete learners.**

What they experience is what they know. For example, if a drama involves the death of someone in the Bible story, some friends may think that the actor died. It's important to say that the actor is pretending.

- **Friends may have a short attention span.**

You can draw attention to one thing at a time by pointing, covering part of a page in a take-home paper, reviewing only the key ideas in a Bible story, and so on. Ask for one-word answers or ask your friend to answer by pointing to a picture.

- **Friends can learn new information.**

Repetition is important; drill and practice facts and routines as you review Bible stories and lesson truths together.

- **Friends may have difficulty transferring what they learn in one setting to another.**

You can help friends by teaching skills in the actual environments in which they will be used. For example, if your Friendship group will sing for a worship service, practice in the sanctuary.

- **Friends may be reluctant to participate in large group or small group activities.**

Be ready to encourage and to walk alongside, but learn also to be quiet in each other's presence. To increase participation, model appropriate behavior, sing facing your friend so that he or she can catch the words, help your friend come up with prayer requests, volunteer to play a part in a drama with your friend, show how to do an activity or make a craft, and so on.

- **Friends can do many things but may need adaptations for some activities.**

Adapting activities to meet your friend's specific needs is crucial. If your friend cannot read the Bible, read to him or her and highlight keywords. If a group activity is too noisy, work one-on-one off to one side of the larger group. If your friend is nonverbal, use simple signs or pictures to tell the story or sing songs.

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- **Friends may have sensory issues.**

Busy, loud places are often intimidating to friends, so allow for a time of adjustment. Allow your friend to be alone if desired; continue to encourage participation without badgering. For more information on sensory issues, see our “Autism & Children’s Ministry” webinar at [friendship.org](http://friendship.org).

- **Friends may communicate in various ways.**

Never assume that a friend who is nonverbal is low-functioning or cannot understand you. A friend who doesn’t use verbal expression may actually understand everything you are saying and not be able to let you know this. You’ll want to work closely with group leaders, family members, and caregivers to determine how best to communicate with your friend.

Behavior is a form of communication. Inappropriate behavior may really be a message. Ask yourself, what is the underlying cause?

### Dealing with Inappropriate Behaviors

Though one-on-one mentoring often helps to reduce behavioral challenges, mentors will likely need to deal with inappropriate behaviors at times. It’s best to

- state expectations clearly and from the beginning, repeating often.
- deal immediately with behavior that will harm your friend or others.
- remain as low-key as possible.
- consult with group leaders, family members, and caregivers on handling such challenges effectively.
- redirect behavior based on input from the above people.

If you are mentoring more than one friend at once,

- try not to let one dominate with all the answers.
- sit between them. (Sitting across a table gives a message of power rather than acceptance.)

If the one-on-one pairing or the small group assignment is not working well, talk to your group leader about making changes.

Modeling expected behavior will encourage your friends to imitate the things you say and the attitudes you show.

### **Building Relationships Beyond the Friendship Program**

You will quickly learn that mentoring is not a one-way relationship and that your relationship goes beyond the time you spend with your friend at Friendship. Here are a few ideas for building a strong bond with your friend:

- Visit your friend at home, work, or school.
- Invite your friend to worship with you on Sunday. For many friends, the only worship time they experience is at Friendship.
- Learn likes and dislikes.
- Give small gifts or cards at birthday and holiday times. Many friends never receive cards from people other than family members or caregivers.
- Do a service project together.
- Invite your friend to your small group activities at church or to a potluck.
- Share prayer requests.
- Go shopping together—this can often help you learn about your friend's likes and dislikes.
- Go to a museum or a concert. Many friends will enjoy experiencing the arts.
- Simple activities such as going for an ice cream cone or a walk in the park will give you opportunities to be friends, just as with other people in your life.
- As time goes on and your relationship builds, ask to be included in planning meetings for your friend. (Schools and group homes are required to schedule routine meetings to set educational, work, and social goals for students and residents. Check with a parent or guardian to seek permission to attend.) Your presence at these meetings will ensure that your friend has someone from the wider community who cares about the opportunities available to him or her.
- As friends grow in their relationship to God, you can encourage them and advocate for them to become fully participating members of your church. When God's people—regardless of their abilities or other differences—serve God together, everyone receives a blessing and God is honored.
- For important guidance, check out our Abuse Prevention Guidelines at [friendship.org/support](http://friendship.org/support).

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### For More Information

To learn more about the topics discussed here, ask for a copy of the *Friendship Program Guide: A Resource for Leaders*. Your group leader may have a copy, or you can order one from Friendship Ministries (1-888-866-8966), or download it from our website ([friendship.org/programguide](http://friendship.org/programguide)). Our website also includes:

- information about ordering Bible studies and other curriculum materials.
- a quarterly newsletter of helpful tips and stories about Friendship programs.
- abuse-prevention guidelines.
- webinars on subjects like autism and high needs.
- e-newsletter sign-up.
- gift ideas for friends.
- and more!