Friendships and Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities

Blaine Clyde

ABSTRACT

Despite years of integration, adolescents with intellectual disabilities still experience loneliness, isolation, and lack of friendships. This research set out to gain a better understanding of the role friendship has in evangelism in the life of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. By surveying the parents of participants in a ministry that works with adolescents with intellectual disabilities, we learned the current state of their friendships, the number and quality of such friendships, and who is building friendships with them. The results gave us a deeper understanding about friendships and adolescents with intellectual disabilities, and the implications for churches and youth ministries.

Keywords: adolescence, evangelism, friend, incarnational evangelism, intellectual disability

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The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of friendship and evangelism with adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Looking at evangelical Protestant churches as well as parachurch organizations, we gain a deeper understanding of evangelism practices for all adolescents and what this could look like for young people with intellectual disabilities. We then look at the implications this has for friendships of adolescents with intellectual disabilities.

**Intellectual Disabilities**

The most prevalent of developmental disabilities are intellectual disabilities, previously known as cognitive disabilities or mental retardation (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2011). In fact, there are roughly a half million children ages 6-21 with intellectual disabilities served through special education in the United States (IDEA Data, 2010). For an adolescent with an intellectual disability this means having an individualized education plan (IEP) and receiving special education services at school (IDEA, 2004). Adolescents with an intellectual disability will often struggle with learning basic skills, communication skills, social skills, and daily living skills (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2011). According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (n.d.), “[a]n intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical skills, which are apparent prior to the age of 18.”

Adolescents with disabilities, like any other teen, need the opportunity to participate in building friendships, dating, education, sports, and recreation (Groce, 2004). However, overprotective parents, isolation in special education classrooms, and lack of transportation can keep these young people feeling lonely and bored (Palermo, 2005). Scuccimarra and Speece (1990) looked at the social activities of students with disabilities two years after high school. They found that television viewing (100%) and movie attendance (90.6%) were the most frequently cited activities. Church going with family and recreation activities with friends was also noted as important to these young adults. However, engagement in physical activities can often be hindered by the many “social, cognitive, motor, and behavioral factors” that young people with intellectual disabilities deal with on a daily basis (Frey, Stanish, and Temple, 2008, p. 110). It has also been observed that when children with disabilities reach adolescence there
is a clear decline in active involvement in recreational programs. This can lead to social isolation (Groce, 2004).

So how do we help adolescents with intellectual disabilities participate in social activities, which are often considered teenage rites of passage? McNair (1993) suggests this is the perfect place for the church to step in and provide natural supports for people with disabilities. Sadly, though, we find that churches are often not a welcoming community for a family and their child with a disability.

Jacier (2007) spent two years interviewing families affected by disability. Seventeen families were interviewed as part of her research. Each one of these families shared very personal and real stories of their experiences with the church. Not surprisingly, “the most overwhelming theme in the interviews was the feeling of being ignored and overlooked” (Jacier, 2007, p. 72). Parents shared their frustration with having support drop off, as their child got older. Once their child was an adolescent the family support was practically nonexistent. In fact, families often left churches because there was not a place for their child or teenager (Jacier, 2007). Jacier (2010) found that “parent after parent expressed the heartbreak of their attempts to find a ministry in which their child could be ideally embraced and taught the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith” (p. 176).

We know that adolescence is a unique phase of life, and according to the American Psychological Association (APA) there is not a standard definition of adolescence (APA, 2002). If you look up adolescence in the dictionary you find it defined as either the “process of growing up” or “the period of life from puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority” (http://www.merriam-webster.com). The American Psychological Association (2002) says that when you define adolescence, in addition to age you must also consider physical, social, and cognitive development. Clark (2004) found that while there is some agreement that adolescence begins with puberty, there is not a clear age reference for the end of adolescence. Some authors now believe there are three stages of adolescence. Early adolescence is roughly between ten and fourteen years old, when Christian youth are often involved in junior high ministry in churches. Middle adolescence is ages fourteen to somewhere between seventeen and nineteen years old. In churches, middle adolescence is the high school or youth group ministry. Late adolescence is considered to be seventeen to nineteen years old through the mid- to late twenties. In churches this age group is typically a college or young adult ministry (Clark, 2005).
Understanding the stages of adolescence and the needs within these stages will help youth workers and churches as they seek to develop programs, and more importantly as they seek to share Christ with the young people in these three very distinct stages. The most important thing to consider is the needs and capabilities of each adolescent. This could not be truer for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. By taking the time to understand individuals with disabilities, churches and youth ministries have the opportunity to become a more welcoming community for families and their children with intellectual disabilities.

**Evangelism**

As we seek to include adolescents with intellectual disabilities in our youth ministries, the goal for all youth should be to grow and be transformed by Christ (Arzola, 2006). Clark (2004) reminds us that the goal of any youth ministry is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ who are authentically walking with God within the context of intimate Christian community” (p. 188). This process of making disciples, however, begins with evangelism. According to Towns (1986), evangelism is “communicating the gospel so that a person understands it and persuading that person to respond to the message.” Fields (1998) puts it in even simpler terms, saying evangelism is simply “sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with those who don’t yet have a personal relationship with him” (p. 53).

Many churches and parachurch ministries are moving towards a more missional approach to evangelism. Missional evangelism is concerned with transforming secular culture and building community with people rather than focusing on techniques or methods (Scott, 2010). This type of evangelism is about going where people are in a community and responding to them as Christ would respond. Missional evangelism has also been referred to as incarnational evangelism. Rebecca Pippert from Out of the Salt Shaker Ministries said in an interview that “understanding the incarnation is foundational to effective evangelism” (Lowry, 2006, p. 60). The incarnational approach to evangelism has become “doing missions and evangelism in Jesus Christ’s way” (Guder, 1994, n.p.). It is understanding how Jesus did evangelism and then following his example. Coleman (1993) illustrates how Jesus chose a few people with whom to spend the majority of his time. He shared his life with this small group of men, training and teaching them about what it meant to follow Him. While Jesus did spend time preaching to large groups of people, the majority of his ministry was
focused on his relationships with a few chosen men. Following Jesus’ model, incarnational evangelism redefines the church’s witness to include both the proclamation of the gospel as well as personal, social witness in the form of relationships (Guder, 1994, n.p.).

Evangelism should not be about making a one-time commitment, but rather about making disciples (McKnight, 2011). This means evangelism is so much more than, as it was once thought of, a “one time only activity” (Brienen, 1995, p. 385). In fact, for most people, especially adolescents, faith development is a long, complex journey. This requires our long-term commitment to people, personal involvement, and a willingness to share our lives (Brienen, 1995). Incarnational evangelism involves identifying with the struggles of people in everyday life, and taking the time to understand another’s pain and suffering. We communicate the gospel when we open ourselves to others and allow them to open up to us (Sprink, 2003). Incarnational ministry is about investing yourself in the lives of others, not so they will join your congregation, but rather become a follower of Jesus (Sprink, 2003). We want young people to experience a living God through the relationships we have built. The outcome of this is that teens will know they have a place to belong, but more importantly, will know Christ as their savior and friend (Fields, 1998; Krum, 2005).

In his study on youth culture, Clark (2004) found something that might surprise some adults: “adolescents want significant relationships with adults who care about them” (p. 53). Young people long to be cared for and taken seriously. However, many do not trust adults and will often act like they don’t care. Adults should not be fooled, though, by the words or actions of adolescents. Whether they know it or not, adolescents desire a safe, secure presence in their lives. In fact, “every child needs authentic, intimate relationships with adults until he or she has completed much of the adolescent process” (Clark, 2004, p. 176). This job cannot be left to parents and teachers alone. Adolescents need a wide variety of adults involved in their lives (Clark, 2004). According to Black (2006), “[t]he National Study of Youth and Religion found that religiously active teenagers had a number of adults in their congregations they could turn to for advice, wisdom, and encouragement” (Black, 2006, p. 27). Black (2006) concludes that teens need to have mentoring friendships, which can lead to participating in church as an adult. All youth need to be integrated within the church community where they can learn that they are cared for (Krum, 2005).
Evangelism and Intellectual Disabilities

In order to integrate people with intellectual disabilities into the church, we must first integrate them into our own lives. This is done through the simple act of friendship (Volpe, 2009). Friendship is a way of helping those with intellectual disabilities experience being connected to God. Friendship is simply sharing life together (Conner, 2010).

Nouwen (1997) reflected on his friendship with a young man with severe impairments named Adam. He writes about sharing life together by simply being together and talking to Adam about life. The significance of this is the fact that Adam could not speak, yet was a full participant in this friendship. Adam offered to Nouwen something he hadn’t been able to find anywhere else. It was a quiet, peaceful place of acceptance and love by simply being together. Friendship with adolescents with intellectual disabilities is not just about us sharing Christ with them. It is about entering into a “mutual trust and affirmation” that gives life to one another (Vanier, 1988, p. 84). Just as Nouwen (1997) discovered with his friend Adam, Vanier (1988) reminds us that when we enter into a friendship with a lonely or suffering person we discover that we may be the ones who are actually being healed: “The one you came to heal becomes your healer” (Vanier, 1988, p. 74). In other words, those without disabilities need people with disabilities in their lives and vice versa.

Jim Rayburn, founder of Young Life, knew that before you could share the gospel with someone they had to be willing to hear it from the person delivering the message. In Young Life this is known as earning the right to be heard (Rayburn & Sublett, 2008). Trust takes time to earn and comes out of genuine friendships that are built together (Shaupp, 2007). Developing trust and connecting with the body of Christ are essential components in the faith development of persons with intellectual disabilities (McNair & McNair, 2011). In fact, faith in Christ may not be exclusively dependent upon a cognitive ability to understand. There are many ways that a person can gain knowledge and understanding of Christ. Swinton (1997) refers to this as an “experiential faith” (p. 25). Experiencing Christ can have a profound impact on a person’s life.

For the profoundly cognitively disabled person, as for all of us, the effective development of that potential is dependent on the outworkings of the Holy Spirit, in the development of authentic
loving relationships which are not restrained or determined by the confines of intellect (Swinton, 1997, p. 25).

When we move beyond knowledge-based methods of evangelism, McNair (2010a) says we should be talking about faith development, which is quite different from the religious education on which many churches focus. By focusing on faith development we are allowing people with all types of abilities to be included (McNair, 2010b). It is through loving relationships that people with intellectual disabilities experience a loving God. These “concrete experiences of friendship” reveal Christ in many ways that pure knowledge cannot (Swinton, 1997, p. 26). If we look to the example of Jesus we find that before he actually taught his disciples any knowledge of God, he first called them to be in relationship with Him and with one another. It was through these relationships and the time spent together that the disciples came to understand who God is and what it meant to follow him. Jesus shows us that the first step towards understanding God is to be in relationship (Coleman, 1993).

**Friendships**

Friendship is an important part of all adolescents’ development. Waldrip (2008) found that “adolescents who had a greater number of friends and higher-quality friendships were expected to show better adjustment than adolescents who had no reciprocated friendships or had friendships that were lower in quality” (p. 847). While Waldrip’s study did not include adolescents with intellectual disabilities, it does give insight into the importance of peer friendships amongst adolescents. Citing Bukowski and Hoza (1989), Waldrip (2008) observed that there are three facets to friendship that influence adolescent development. These are “the number of mutual friends, participation in a very best friendship, and friendship quality” (p. 835). Sadly, for adolescents with intellectual disabilities we see that even though integration has often been an integral part of school systems, many still experience isolation and loneliness with very few friendships.

Hutchison (1990) found that often times individuals with disabilities become over-dependent on services, professionals, and volunteers as a main source of companionship. Rather than focusing on volunteers to bridge the gap in friendship, more work needs to be done on developing a broader base of support and friendship within the community. Ideally, friendship should be voluntary, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial.
The benefits of a reciprocal friendship are “security, social support, learning problem-solving skills, self-knowledge and self-esteem, as well as the development of social competence” (Waldrip, 2008, p. 835).

Summary
Jesus’ mission was to come to the world, find the lost, serve them, and teach them about the Father. Following Jesus’ example, Christians must get out of the church doors and minister to needy people (Towns, 2010). For those who are seeking to include adolescents with disabilities in their churches, youth ministries, and parachurch organizations this means we must go into our communities, build friendships with adolescents with intellectual disabilities, support them in building authentic peer friendships, and together hear and experience Christ’s love. In the context of an integrated community we allow adolescents with disabilities to understand the Gospel in a more holistic manner (Jacober, 2008). So let us do as Clark (2004) says and “roll up our sleeves, go to adolescents, listen to them and unconditionally care for them” (p. 190). This is what evangelism with adolescents with intellectual disabilities must look like in our churches and parachurch organizations in the twenty-first century.

Method
In order to understand adolescents with intellectual disabilities’ experience with friendships, a study was conducted of a parachurch ministry that serves teens with and without disabilities in the Pacific Northwest. The organization was chosen to give us a deeper understanding of the world of adolescents with intellectual disabilities and the friendships these young people currently experience. The ministry studied will be referred to as Mission Teens. A key approach in Mission Teens is incarnational evangelism. Through the relationships that are built, volunteers and staff have the opportunity to share Christ with adolescents. The study looked deeper into the friendships that are being built within Mission Teens, specifically looking at whom adolescents with disabilities are building friendships with and the quality of these friendships.

If friendship is the basis for sharing Christ with adolescents with intellectual disabilities, then how is the ministry of Mission Teens doing in the area of building friendships with these young people? Are adolescents with
disabilities experiencing authentic friendships with peers or only with paid staff and adult volunteers? The author would like to understand the types of friendships adolescents with intellectual disabilities experience as well as the quality of these friendships. The author is also interested in who is building friendships with adolescents with intellectual disabilities.

**Description of Subjects of Study**
The sample was limited to adolescents who participate in one of six Mission Teens groups. Four of the Mission Teens groups are located in Washington State and two of the Mission Teens groups are located in Oregon. Four of the Mission Teens groups are part of a larger traditional Mission Teens ministry, which includes adolescents without disabilities. Two of the Mission Teens groups are separate and only include teens with disabilities. All six of the Mission Teens ministries have separate groups for adolescents with disabilities. The directors from each of the participating Mission Teens groups were surveyed. Parents of adolescents who participate in Mission Teens were also surveyed.

**Procedure**
An online survey was emailed to parents of adolescents with intellectual disabilities who participate in Mission Teens in the Pacific Northwest. The survey was given to parents, rather than the adolescents themselves. Questions were designed to understand the types and quality of friendships adolescents with disabilities experience. There were fifty-three parents who responded to the online survey. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The open-ended questions on the survey were analyzed for common themes. The directors from each of the participating Mission Teens groups were also emailed an online survey. This survey was designed to understand the types of impairments individuals experience that are represented in each of the Mission Teens groups.

**Findings**
Six Mission Teens groups in the Northwest participated in the study. The directors of each of these groups were emailed a link to an online survey to find out how many adolescents with disabilities participate in their local area ministry and to also learn how many of these adolescents have intellectual disabilities. There are currently 227 active participants in the six Mission Teens groups. Of these 227 participants, 27 have a physical
disability along with an intellectual disability. The remaining 200 have intellectual disabilities without a physical disability.

The participating Mission Teens directors emailed an online survey to all of the parents of adolescents with disabilities participating in the weekly groups. A total of fifty-three parents participated in the study. Parents were asked to respond to questions concerning their son or daughter who participates in Mission Teens. All of the questions asked about their child’s experiences with friendships. Overall, fifty-seven percent of the young people were female and forty-three percent male. Fifty-three percent of the participating adolescents were 22 years old or older. Forty-eight percent were between the ages of 15 and 21, which is high school age for students in special education.

Parents were asked where their child made friends before being involved in Mission Teens. Participants were allowed to choose more than one response. Seventy-nine percent of parents said that their child made their friendships at school. Church, parks and recreation programs, and Special Olympics each had thirty-four percent of participants saying this is also where their child made friends. Eight percent said their child did not have friends before Mission Teens.

Parents were then asked whether their child has more, less or the same amount of friends since being involved in Mission Teens. Sixty-eight percent have more friends and thirty-two percent have about the same. No one said they have fewer friends. When asked about the quality of their child’s friendships before being involved in Mission Teens, nineteen percent of adolescents had above-average to excellent quality of friendships and forty-seven percent had poor or below-average quality of friendships. After being involved in Mission Teens, forty-one percent of adolescents had above-average to excellent quality of friendships and nineteen percent had poor or below-average quality of friendships.

Parents were asked who in Mission Teens is building a friendship with their son or daughter. Respondents were able to choose all that apply, so more than one answer was often given. Seventy-seven percent responded that leaders are building a friendship with their son or daughter, and sixty-five percent said staff is building a friendship with their son or daughter. Sixty-five percent of parents said that their child has peers with a disability building a friendship with them and thirty-three percent said peers without a disability are building friendships with their son or daughter. Four percent responded that no one is building a friendship with their son or daughter.
Parents were asked how important it is to them for their child to have opportunities to build friendships with peers with disabilities, without disabilities, and with Mission Teens leaders. Eighty-one percent think it is important for their child to have friendships with peers with disabilities. Seventy-three percent think it is important for their child to have friendships with peers without disabilities. In regards to Mission Teens leaders, eighty-three percent stated it was important or very important for their child to have opportunities to build friendships with these adults.

When asked if Mission Teens gives their son or daughter more, less, or the same opportunities to build friendships with peers without a disability, fifty-eight percent said there were more opportunities and forty percent said it is about the same. Only one person thought there were fewer opportunities to build friendships with peers without a disability. Forty-nine percent of parents said their son or daughter meets peers without disabilities at school. Twenty-seven percent meet peers without disabilities at church and twenty-four percent meet them at Mission Teens. Thirty-one percent said their child does not have any friends who are peers without a disability.

Parents were asked about the number of friends their child currently has. The first question asked was “How many casual friends does your child have?” A casual friend is defined as someone who is known by name, and you enjoy each other. Fifty out of the fifty-three respondents answered the question. Twenty percent said their child has more than twenty casual friends. Twenty-four percent said their child has ten to twenty casual friends. Some of the parents responded by writing in “lots” or “many.” There were sixteen percent of parents that responded this way. Four percent said they did not know how many casual friends their child had. Twenty-four percent said their child has one to ten casual friends. Six percent has few or not many casual friends and two percent said their child did not have any casual friends.

Parents were then asked, “How many close friends does your child have?” A close friend is defined as someone your child spends time with and has fun with. This would be a mutual feeling. Fifty-two out of fifty-three parents responded to this question. No parents said their child has more than twenty close friends or “lots or many” close friends. Twelve percent of parents said their child has ten to twenty close friends. Sixty-three percent of parents said their child has one to ten close friends. Two percent responded that their child has “few or not many” close friends. Twenty-three percent said their child does not have any close friends.
Parents were asked about the number of best friends their child currently has. A best friend was defined as someone you spend consistent time with outside of school or club. There is a mutual sharing of personal thoughts or feelings, and a mutual feeling of care and support for one another. Fifty percent of parents said their child has one to ten best friends. Fifty percent said their child does not have a best friend.

Parents were asked three open-ended questions. The first question was “What would you want for your child in regards to friendships?” Five clear themes emerged from the answers to this question. These themes were friendships with peers with disabilities, friendships with peers without disabilities, friendships that don’t revolve around adults, friendships that develop naturally, and training on how to build friendships. Parents want their child to have friendships with both peers with disabilities and those without disabilities. One parent stated, “I want a mixture of friends who care and enjoy him, with or without disabilities.” Parents would like to see their son or daughter develop friendships naturally without an adult facilitating them. Parents also commented: “I like him to have at least one or two friends he can do things with and talk with without an adult having to mediate.” “Someone to do things with without mom facilitating.” “We would like to have our child have more friendships outside of school and work; people who would want to have him over or come to our house.” “Close, voluntary opportunities to share in outside experiences, such as invitations from friends (initiated by such friends) to hike with, go to the movies with, or experience some other activity outside of planned events with formal groups.”

The second open-ended question was “Is there anything else you want us to know about your child’s friendships?” Three themes emerged from the responses to this question. These themes were the role Mission Teens has played in their child’s life, the role of parents in their child’s friendships, and the need for training in how to be a friend. Parents want their child to have “coaching on how to be a friend.” They also struggle with the frustration that their child’s friendships are dependent on them organizing and facilitating. There is also frustration with the need to get to know other parents so they can trust that their child will be safe at someone else’s home. One parent said “It’s often a strain on me as a parent because I’m doing all the work to help facilitate the friendships as many of the other parents aren’t as willing or able to do so.” Finally, parents were asked, “How else can Mission Teens serve your child and/or your family? Four themes emerged from this question. These themes were weekly group meetings, Mission Teens leaders, friendships, and small groups. Parents want more Mission Teens events
and more social opportunities for their child. Parents would like to have Mission Teens leaders spend time with their son or daughter outside of group. They also hope that small groups could be added for friendship development and faith development. One parent emphatically stated, “Find us a friend for our son!”

Discussion
Mission Teens is a ministry that focuses on building friendships with adolescents. We see that Mission Teens has had a positive impact on the lives of adolescents with intellectual disabilities who are involved in the program. Parents wrote that Mission Teens has been the best place for their child to make friends. Others said that Mission Teens is an important part of their child’s social life. Sixty-eight percent, more than half of the parents, said their child has developed more friends since being involved in Mission Teens. Before Mission Teens the majority of adolescents (forty-seven percent) had a poor or below-average quality of friendship, and only nineteen percent had above-average or excellent quality of friendship. After being involved in Mission Teens we see this trend turn around. Forty-one percent of parents report that their child has above-average or excellent quality of friendships after being involved in Mission Teens, and only nineteen percent have poor or below-average quality of friendships. This is double the growth in quality of friendships since being involved in Mission Teens.

The study also focused on whom these young people are friends with. Within Mission Teens, the majority (seventy-seven percent) of adolescents with intellectual disabilities are building friendships with volunteer leaders, the adults who volunteer in the program. Sixty-five percent state that their son or daughter is also building a friendship with Mission Teens staff. This shows us that the Mission Teens model of leaders and staff reaching out to and building friendships with adolescents is successful. It is also important to note that eighty-three percent of parents believe it is important for their son or daughter to have the opportunity to build these friendships with the staff and volunteers. Parents had this to say about the adults who are staff and volunteers: “The leaders are welcoming and engaging. It has boosted her confidence tremendously.” “The leaders do a wonderful job of helping the kids get to know them (the leaders) and each other.” “We are so thankful our daughter can learn about her Lord Jesus in a fun, safe, and nurturing environment.”
When looking at who is building a friendship with adolescents with intellectual disabilities we also see that sixty-five percent are building friendships with peers with a disability. In comparison, thirty-three percent have friendships with peers without a disability. Two people said that their child is not friends with anyone in Mission Teens. By having separate clubs for adolescents with disabilities there are a lot of opportunities to build friendships with peers with a disability, but limited opportunities to build friendships with peers without a disability. Some parents commented that they like having their son or daughter be friends with peers who have similar abilities. In fact, eighty-one percent said it is important for their child to build friendships with peers with a disability. At the same time, seventy-three percent also want their child to be friends with peers without a disability. Interestingly, parents really desire for their child to simply have a friend, regardless of disability or not. The heart of parents is that they just want their son or daughter to have a friend. When parents were asked what they would want for their child in regards to friendships, comments were made such as: “A small but very close group, both disabled and not.” “A mixture of friends who care and enjoy him, with or without disabilities.” “I would like my child to have the opportunity to get to know more people with and without disabilities.” “I would like my son to develop a friendship with a peer (with or without a disability)

Table 1
Percentage of families indicating their child has a particular type of friend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Casual Friends</th>
<th>Close Friends</th>
<th>Best Friends</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N for each group</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 . . .</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots or Many . . .</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20 . . .</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10 . . .</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few or not many . . .</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No . . .</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know . . .</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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that would be a close friend.” Since being involved in Mission Teens, though, there has not been that much change in the opportunities to build friendships with peers without a disability. Fifty-eight percent of parents said there are about the same opportunities to make friends with non-disabled peers as before being involved in Mission Teens. Parents were asked where their child meets peers without a disability. Schools give the biggest opportunity to meet peers without a disability. This makes sense because schools are an integrated environment. Yet, with all of the push towards integration we still only have half of the participants (forty-nine percent) stating that their son or daughter is making friends at school with peers without a disability. Mission Teens is helping twenty-four percent make friends with peers without a disability and the church is helping twenty-seven percent. This tells us a lot about the current state of churches in the area of integration. We can also conclude that parents perceive Mission Teens is not contributing to adolescents with intellectual disabilities having more opportunities to build friendships with peers without a disability. It is recommended that Mission Teens pursue more opportunities for integration with peers without a disability. This can take place by participating in Mission Teens groups for adolescents without disabilities. Integration can also be achieved by including adolescents without disabilities in the current weekly groups for adolescents with disabilities.

The most revealing data about the life of adolescents with intellectual disabilities is the responses to the questions regarding the number of friends they have. Sixty-eight percent of parents feel that Mission Teens has helped their child make more friends. However, when we look at the data on the number of friends, we see the majority still have few to no friends. Friendships were put into three categories: casual, close, and best. A casual friend is defined as someone who is known by name, and you enjoy each other. The survey shows that ninety-four percent of participants have casual friends. A close friend is defined as someone your child spends time with and has fun with. Seventy-seven percent of participants have one to twenty close friends. Twenty-three percent said their child does not have any close friends. When we look at best friends, it is defined as someone with whom you spend consistent time outside of school or club, where there is a mutual sharing of personal thoughts or feelings and a mutual feeling of care and support for one another. Fifty percent of parents said their child does not have a best friend. Fifty percent said their child has one to ten best friends.
When we pair these results with the comments that parents made about their child’s friendships, we are able to get a clearer picture of the social life of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. In the three open-ended questions there were some common themes across the questions. One common theme is that parents really want friendships to develop naturally without the parent needing to be the one to make it happen. Parents had comments to say such as: “I would like him to have at least one or two friends he can do things with without an adult having to mediate.” “Someone to do things with without mom facilitating.” “It usually takes the involvement of parents to facilitate the friendships.” “It is often a strain on me as a parent because I’m doing all the work to help facilitate the friendships.” When we read responses like this it helps us to understand why Mission Teens volunteer leaders and staff are so important to parents. As one parent said, “Knowing there are other adults who don’t have a child with a disability, but totally understand and love our kids is beyond expression.” Parents expressed how difficult it is for them to be the ones that facilitate their child’s friendships. This is where Mission Teens has the opportunity to provide some relief to the parents. The Mission Teens staff and leaders can help bridge that gap and give parents a much needed break.

The other common theme in the open-ended questions was the need for more training on how to make friends. While friendship has been a result of being involved in Mission Teens, there is clearly a need for some specific training in the area of friendship skills. Parents suggested things like “what to talk about with your friends” as well as coaching young people on “ways to be a friend.” Role-playing, discussing friendship, and problem solving together could help adolescents with intellectual disabilities learn how to make friends as well as be a friend.

**Conclusion**

Intellectual disabilities are the most prevalent developmental disability and impact about a half million children ages six to twenty-one (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2011; IDEA Data, 2010). It has been found that many adolescents with intellectual disabilities live out the majority of their teenage and adult years feeling lonely and isolated. In spite of years of integration, these young people still lack mutual peer friendships (Lutfiyya, 1997). Yet we know it is through friendship that many adolescents with intellectual disabilities experience God’s love (Swinton, 1997).
Incarnational evangelism is a way for Christians to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ through caring friendships with adolescents with intellectual disabilities (Conner, 2010). Incarnational evangelism involves taking the time to build trust, develop a friendship, and share life together. Through these friendships there are opportunities for the Gospel to be shared verbally as well as experienced (Sprink, 2003). The question to be asked, then, is how are churches and youth ministries doing in the area of friendship building with adolescents with disabilities? Are these young people experiencing authentic, peer friendships or are they only friends with adult volunteers and paid staff? This study looked at one ministry that uses incarnational evangelism in their approach with adolescents with disabilities. The purpose was to better understand the types of friendships these young people are currently experiencing as well as the quality of friendships.

It is recommended that future studies survey a larger sampling of Mission Teens groups. It is also recommended that Mission Teens groups that currently integrate with non-disabled groups be surveyed, and that the results of that study be compared with the results of this survey. Future studies could also be done which survey the adolescents themselves so as to gain a better understanding of their own thoughts and feelings about friendships. It is recommended that other ministries and churches be included in a larger-scale study on adolescents with disabilities and their friendships. While this study focused on the number of friends and the quality of friendships for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, there is still a need for further study on the link between incarnational evangelism and friendships that are built. Questions that still remain are “do the friendships that are currently being built between Mission Teens leaders and adolescents with intellectual disabilities lead to opportunities for sharing the gospel?” and “do adolescents with intellectual disabilities respond to the gospel through incarnational evangelism?”

References


