

# **Qualities in friendship – Within an outside perspective - Definitions expressed by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** This study examined how adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities define qualities of friendship and discussed the extent to which these definitions adhere to established definitions of close friendship. **Materials and methods:** The study was based on qualitative interviews with eleven adolescents in secondary school. The interviews were supplemented with information from six parents. A thematic structural analysis was used to identify themes. **Results:** Qualities of friendship were categorized as mutual preference, mutual enjoyment, shared interactions, care, mutual trust, and bonding. The criteria for close friendship seem to be fulfilled, albeit to a moderate degree. Closeness and reciprocity appear to be significant in this study, although these features have been considered less relevant within this target group in previous research. **Conclusions:** Differences in definitions may

explain divergent results compared with other studies; the need to achieve equivalence in friendship may be another.

**Key words:** adolescents, closeness, friendship, mild intellectual disabilities, reciprocity

## **Introduction**

Friendship is an essential relationship that may involve practical support and may act as a protective factor in terms of physical and mental well-being (Mason et al., 2013; Salmon, 2012).

Good experiences with friendship in childhood and adolescence can thus be significant for quality of life (Bramston et al., 2005). Friendship may also play a crucial role in coping and adjustment, e.g., in assisting with support in terms of managing stress (Estell et al., 2009; Jobling et al., 2000; Sullivan et al., 2012).

Close friendship has been defined as an emotional bond between two individuals who are characterized by mutual preference, mutual enjoyment and shared interactions, which is also stable across time (Howes, 1983). Certain characteristic aspects of friendship are often cited: similarity, companionship, intimacy, closeness, help, conflict, mutuality, support, stability and security (Bowker, 2004; Bukowski et al., 1994; Jobling et al., 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995; Webster and Carter, 2013;). Although shared activities and companionship seem to be essential features of friendship relationships in young children, intimacy, loyalty, trust and closeness are of primary significance in relationships between adolescents (Bukowski et al., 1993; Estell et al., 2009; Meyer and Ostrosky, 2014). With age, friendships become increasingly important (Bukowski et al., 1993; Simpkins et al., 2006). Those with more intimate friendships appear to demonstrate perspective-taking skills, better

quality, perceived closeness and reciprocity in their relationships (Simpkins et al., 2006; Siperstein et al., 1997; Tipton et al., 2013). Reciprocity may include mutual behaviour and mutual nomination (Webster and Carter, 2013). Otherwise, reciprocal friendship has been described as a friendship in which each member of the dyad chooses the other as a best friend (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995).

Positive relationships are expected to promote pro-social skills and contribute to social competence. However, social competence related to peers requires one to be able to practice the complex social skills that are necessary to achieve satisfactory interactions. Adolescents who have trouble communicating, insufficient memory skills and cognitive difficulties may therefore be vulnerable, and friendship may be challenging (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Guralnick, 2010; Matheson et al., 2007; Meyer and Ostrosky, 2014).

Research on social participation in children with special needs in ordinary schools has shown that these students are more likely to experience rejection by others (Frostdad and Pijl, 2007; Mand, 2007), and they are assessed as less socially attractive; thus, loneliness can be a major problem (Heiman, 2000; Jobling et al., 2000; Martin, 2013; Mason et al., 2013). Other studies have contributed to refining this impression. A larger study of friendship among students with and without learning disabilities in mainstream schools showed examples of good peer relationships (Estell et al., 2009). Often, students with learning disabilities had best friends and just as many good friends as other students, although fewer friendships seemed to persist over time. Research studies have also shown that students with mild disabilities tend to prefer peers with disabilities as their best friends (Curtin and Clarke, 2005; Estell et al., 2009; Reed et al., 2011; Sigstad, 2013). However, it appears that such friendships may be less about mutual friendship (Reed et al., 2011).

Moreover, people with intellectual disabilities seem to be less capable of establishing close and mutual friendships compared with their typically developed peers (Heiman, 2000; Jobling et al., 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Siperstein et al., 1997; Tipton et al., 2013). Friendships of adolescents with intellectual disabilities have been characterized by less closeness and less positive reciprocity than were present in friendships with peers who did not have disabilities (Siperstein et al., 1997; Tipton et al., 2013). Compared with the friendships between peers without learning problems, friendship dyads that include children with learning problems have been characterized by less verbal communication, collaborative decision-making, limited emotional exchange, less frequently shared enjoyment, an asymmetric distribution of roles, and an absence of mutual interest (Siperstein et al., 1997). Webster and Carter (2013) found that only some friendship dyads among students with intellectual disabilities were characterized by shared interactions, mutual enjoyment and mutual preference, in contrast to studies of close friendship among the typically developed (Howes, 1983).

Adolescents with intellectual disabilities appear to have lower expectations for friendship. Their friendships also seem to have more similarities with friendships among children at younger ages, more often characterized by companionship, shared interactions, similarity in interests or personalities, sheer proximity, and stability rather than closeness, intimacy, reciprocity, and familiarity (Heiman, 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Siperstein et al., 1997; Webster and Carter, 2013). This is partly explained with the premise that people with intellectual disabilities are not fully able to understand the emotional aspects of developing relationships (Jobling et al., 2000). Understanding friendship is all about having the ability to understand and gain the experience of both having and being a friend. The ability to maintain a friendship also appears to be affected by early social skills and behavioural problems, in addition to the presence of an intellectual disability (Tipton et al., 2013). Cognitive limitations and challenges, both socially and in communications, may be possible explanatory variables.

Matheson et al. (2007) found that adolescents with lower functioning were more satisfied with their friendships compared with others who demonstrated higher functioning. The most stable friendships seemed to be relationships among peers who had gone through the same special school classes, some of them for many years.

Previous research has thus demonstrated a discrepancy between individuals with and without disabilities in how they describe the qualities of friendship (Heiman, 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Siperstein et al., 1997; Webster and Carter, 2013). Nevertheless, previous descriptions on this subject appear to lack an elaboration that might contribute to a deeper understanding of the qualities of friendship among people with intellectual disabilities or a contextual evaluation of these characteristics based on an inside perspective.

The question is whether people with intellectual disabilities are unable to experience intimacy and reciprocity of friendship on an equal basis with others because of inadequate or insufficient skills. It is possible that they are not able to understand the emotional aspects of a friendship and lack the ability to fully understand both how to be and how to take care of friends. Alternatively, this inability may be due to other factors, such as lack of experience with equal relationships or lack of support conditions for maintaining close friendships. To better capture how adolescents with intellectual disabilities emphasize and explain the qualities of their friendships, concerns about these friendships, and what friendship means to them, more in-depth qualitative research seemed to be required.

Previous studies have largely focused on analyses of friendships in dyads of people with and without intellectual disabilities (e.g., Matheson et al., 2007; Siperstein et al., 1997; Tipton et al., 2013; Webster and Carter, 2013). The current study is not an analysis of the friendships of adolescents with intellectual disabilities but rather an analysis of how they define friendship. The purpose was to examine how adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities define

qualities in a close friendship and to attempt to ascertain what forms the basis for such a friendship.

The study included in-depth interviews with adolescents and parents, and the adolescents participated as key respondents. Mild intellectual disabilities were defined according to the ICD-10 (The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th revision) (2015). Established definitions of friendship assume reciprocity to be a critical component (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995; Simpkins et al., 2006; Webster and Carter, 2013). Although the descriptions of friendship are primarily expressed from an individual perspective in this study, well-known theoretical concepts were used. Based on the respondents' own descriptions of a close friend, the study posed the following two research questions:

1. How is a good friendship defined by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities?
2. To what extent does this definition accord with the definition of close friendship, which is described in the literature as defining friendship among typically developed adolescents?

## **Materials and methods**

The study was conducted in secondary schools in Norway and was based on qualitative in-depth interviews with eleven adolescents and six parents. The research design for these interviews was twofold: informal conversational interviews with the adolescents and a semi-structured approach in the interviews with the parents (Turner, 2010). This study was largely based on individual interviews, with the exception of two focus group interviews. The latter addressed the same topics and research questions as the individual interviews but with the intention of obtaining more detailed descriptions (Meyer and Gjørsum, 2010).

### *The selection process*

In order to strengthen the education for students with special needs, special groups are occasionally organized within mainstream schools in Norway. In these cases, students are given their education partially in these groups and partly in ordinary classes. Belonging to a special group in an ordinary school was chosen as one of a number of selection criteria to provide the option to include friends both with and without intellectual disabilities. Thus, adolescents and parents belonging to such special groups in four ordinary schools were invited. The researcher made a first contact with the heads of special education at each school. Then information meetings were held for the special group teachers. The teachers received information about the study, about the recruitment process, as well as information about the teachers' role in the recruitment. On the basis of this information, schools were also asked to state the number of information letters that they were going to provide to students and parents. The schools gave feedback on a number of 38 potential interviewees (i.e. students with intellectual disabilities and their parents) (See table 1).

**Table 1. Qualities in friendship - Recruitment and sample**

Number of potential participants	Dropout	Number of invited participants	Final sample	
38 potential participants with intellectual disabilities	8 potential participants with intellectual disabilities	30 invited participants with intellectual disabilities	11 students with intellectual disabilities	6 parents of adolescents with intellectual disabilities
38 potential pairs of parents-parents of adolescents with intellectual disabilities	8 potential pairs of parents-parents of adolescents with intellectual disabilities	30 invited pairs of parents - parents of adolescents with intellectual disabilities	7 girls 4 boys	5 mothers 1 pair of parents
			13-16 years old	
			8 students with a clear medical diagnosis 3 students with no known diagnosis, but assessed to have a mild form of intellectual disability	

An information sheet to students and parents was sent to schools via contact persons.

Teachers in the special groups were asked to provide the information note about the project to the students and the parents who were concerned.

The teachers also selected the students based on the following criteria: students who had close friends who wanted to participate (not dependent on having a disability) and students with the necessary social competence and sufficient language prerequisites to attend. The basis for the students' participation was an interest in taking part in a conversation about friendship. The teachers assessed whether students had the necessary social competence and sufficient language prerequisites to attend, that they were able to talk about how they felt about having a good friend. In order to participate, the participants were therefore expected to have adequate verbal language to communicate about the subject; to be able to express themselves in complete sentences, without any need for alternative or supplementary communication aids. The interview also presupposed that the adolescents had the capacity to achieve joint attention



with the interviewer on a topic or an activity (looking at photos, developing mind maps, drawing and talking about their own drawing), in addition to having the ability and the desire to take turns in the conversation.

Additionally, parents of adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities were selected for participation.

Students and their parents were asked to provide permission for the interview by sending one written, jointly signed consent form directly to the researcher. In order to seek informed consent from the students with intellectual disabilities, the parents were assessed to be more capable of conveying information about the research project. They could explain, clarify misunderstandings, and thus provide the child the opportunity to refuse. Thus, the information sheet was not particularly designed for the students. However, the information about the project was repeated to the students when they met for an interview. Then, they got a new opportunity to withdraw.

Three ordinary schools with special groups for students with mild intellectual disabilities were involved in the study. The actual sample included only individual students with mild intellectual disabilities (see table 1). Eleven adolescents participated, four boys and seven girls, 13-16 years old, and eight of them had a clear medical diagnosis. Based on the teachers' overall assessment of the students' intellectual functioning, academic skills and social adaptation, the additional three students were also thought to have a mild form of intellectual disability, although the diagnosis was not finally medically confirmed. The participant selection for the focus groups was based on couples of friends. The focus groups involved two such couples of friends, a total of four individuals. In addition, parents of six of these eleven adolescents attended, represented by one couple and five mothers.

The study involved nineteen interviews: eleven individual interviews and two focus group interviews with the adolescents, and six interviews with parents. Three of the eleven adolescents referred to friends without intellectual disabilities in the interviews (two of whom were younger), whereas the other referred to friendships with peers with intellectual disabilities.

### *The interviews*

The interviews/focus groups with the adolescents were based on informal communication, with a focus on a good friendship. Drawings, pictures and mind maps were used as supplements to strengthen the communication in the interview, with an intention of achieving more detailed descriptions without having a predetermined set of structured questions. The interviews focused on the following similar main topics: well-being at school (during class, during break time), preferred activity, relation to classmates, self-perception, friendship (What makes a good friend?) The focus groups had similar structure as the individual student interviews, an open conversation that was associated with the same themes about friendship. The focus group interviews were intended to strengthen the individual interviews. The purpose was to utilize the interaction between the participants in the focus groups, in addition to the information from the individual interviews.

The parents' interviews were conducted using an ordinary semi-structured guide, which had predetermined issues and the opportunity to openly discuss new topics, if such a direction emerged in the interviews. The interviews were based on the following predetermined themes: The child's well-being at school (during class, during break time), preferred activity, relation to classmates, self-perception, social participation, friendship (characteristics of friendship,

significance of friendship). These interviews were only used as supplemental material in this part of the study to contextualize the adolescents' descriptions.

The interviews with the adolescents were conducted at school, whereas the parent interviews were completed at the parents' home or at the researcher's place of work. The interviews and focus groups with the adolescents lasted for approximately a half an hour, the parent interviews lasted up to one and a half hours. The interviews were taped on a digital recorder and transcribed word for word as soon as possible after the interviews were completed.

### *Ethical considerations*

The study was conducted in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (2015) and approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

The respondents were guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw from the project at any time. In addition, the respondents' statements were anonymous in terms of names, dialects, positional information and other recognizable characteristics.

### *Methodological challenges*

Conducting qualitative research interviews among individuals with intellectual disabilities can present specific research challenges (Sigstad, 2014). As noted above, obtaining satisfactory voluntary informed consent was resolved by the adolescents and parents providing consent together. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on establishing confidence to create trust and allow for open communication in the interviews with the purpose of attaining a high degree of complementary and meaningful descriptions from the respondents, although alternative

strategies had to be used, such as providing help completing sentences and using supplemental materials, conducive questions and repetition. Interviews among informants with intellectual disabilities often require great deal of experience. Conversations with people with intellectual disabilities may be characterized by brief answers, yes-saying, silence and inconsistent statements, which requires flexibility on the part of interviewer. To get the most extensive information, the interviewer must to a greater degree be able to make changes during the interview, and intuitively adapt the questions and topics immediately in relation to the informant. Such flexibility is difficult to implement in a more structured interview, thus a more open conversation with help of supplemental materials, may be better suited.

### *Data analyses*

The analysis was conducted by a data-driven process, with a view towards the theoretical categories in the field, including mutual preference, mutual enjoyment, shared interactions (Howes, 1983; Webster and Carter, 2013) and reciprocal nomination (Chamberlain et al., 2007). The primary material consisted of interview dialogues and mind maps by the adolescents, which were analysed separately and then mixed. The parental interviews were used as supplements. The mind maps were intended to help underpin the interview data from the youths, and the parents' data were included in an additional effort to strengthen the credibility of the informants' interpretations.

A thematic structural analysis was used to identify themes (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004). Using condensed descriptions, attempts were made to capture the essential meaning of lived experience. The meaning units were further condensed into sub-themes, which were then assembled into themes (see table 2). At the analysis level of the sub-themes, the themes were analysed with a view to theoretical categories, and it was discussed whether the subthemes

fulfilled the criteria for established theoretical categories. An established category was utilized as a description of the theme; if the criteria did not fit, a new category was established as a main theme.

Three of the main themes were equivalent to the established theoretical categories: mutual preference, mutual enjoyment, and shared interactions. The other main themes were developed on basis of the sub-themes in the present data material.

**Table 2. Example of a structural analysis (youth interviews)**

Meaning unit	Condensation	Sub-theme	Theme
I: When you are together, who determines what you are going to do? A: There is really a little bit of me, and then there is a little bit of him, and there is a bit of both.	Both of them determine what to do	Shared authority	Mutual trust
A: A good friend is someone you can trust, someone who will not tell anyone anything. So you can keep your secrets for yourselves. A promise and stuff, it's a good friend.	Trust each other	Familiarity	Mutual trust

The phrases in the mind maps were analysed in accordance with the analysis of the interviews, as described in table 2. Single concepts expressed by the respondents were assessed to have a function of already condensed meaning units. These responses were coded directly into the condensation column (see table 2).

## **Results and discussion**

In addition to one section with a focus on methodological limitations, the presentation of the qualitative analysis below is divided into two sections. The first section is based on a thematic analysis on a level of self-understanding based on the respondents' own thematising (Brinkmann, 2014). Key characteristics of a good friendship are described and discussed on a theoretical level within each theme. Based on the presentation in the first section, an overall discussion will be addressed in the second section.

### ***Key characteristics of a good friendship – results and discussion***

These results primarily reflect the definition of a good friendship as expressed by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities. The definitions are exemplified by their own experiences and can be categorized based on six themes: mutual preference, mutual enjoyment, shared interactions, care, mutual trust, and bonding (see table 3). One theme was added based on the interviews with the parents with a view to deepening the overall discussion: reciprocal nomination. Quotes are used to exemplify the themes through conversations between the interviewer (I), the adolescents (A) and the parents (P).

**Table 3. Qualities in Friendship - Themes and subthemes – Adolescents**

Mutual preference	Mutual enjoyment	Shared interactions	Care	Mutual trust	Bonding
Calling someone a friend	Experience of enjoyment in the fellowship	Shared interests	Support	Shared authority	Closeness/Loss
Spending leisure time together	Description of feelings towards the best friend	Everyone included	Displaying care	Security in risking quarrels	
Mutual behaviour		Future planning	Standing up for each other	Reciprocal promise of lasting friendship	
			Exchanging services	Familiarity	
			Confidence in the other		
			An absence of negative behavior		
			Empathy		

*Mutual preference*

In the current study, mutual preference was a relevant characteristic of friendship among the adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities. Within mutual preference, three sub-themes seemed to be essential: calling someone a friend, spending leisure time together, and mutual behaviour.

Calling someone a friend shows certain preferences with respect to friendship. When they were asked how they became friends, one answered:

A: We were only familiar with one another, something just clicked.

Spending leisure time together is often considered a characteristic sign of friendship, and the adolescents wanted to spend more time together outside of school. If long distances were a barrier, using social media or cell phones was an alternative. Thus, the friendship became verified by mutual behaviour:

A: I try to call her. I have to wait, and then my cell phone is calling. And then I say, hello, and suddenly Evy is there. Sometimes, she is calling me all the time.

The interviews with the parents confirmed the same sub-themes as relevant to mutual preference, but they added equality as a necessary condition, i.e., the adolescents had to be like-minded:

P: I observe how they are playing. There is none that is boss, one, who is in such a way mom or ... They are just jumping straight into Barbie dolls, playing or watching the movie or just jumping in the water ... It is nobody who is the leader.

Almost all of the adolescents were eager to designate a friend as their best friend, by which they would demonstrate a type of mutual preference. These friends related that they tried to spend their leisure time together, and mutual behaviour appeared to reinforce the friendship. Mutual likes are a previously recognized feature of friendship that indicates a great possibility that an interaction will be followed by social initiative, which can be reinforced by an emotional connection (Howes, 1983). These adolescents took the social initiative, which most likely resulted in stronger mutual attachments. Presence of mutual preference as a quality in friendship is in accordance with previous studies of friendships in children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities (Matheson et al., 2007; Webster and Carter, 2013). The desire to do something together was called companionship in the study by Matheson et al. (2007) and thus may be in compliance with mutual liking.



### *Mutual enjoyment*

Mutual enjoyment characterized the friendships and found expression as an experience of enjoyment in fellowship with another. The adolescents described mutual enjoyment as a quality that characterized their relationships, which was also exemplified by indicating their own emotions in relation to the other:

A1: Then, I feel happy inside.

A2: Very nice to have a friend.

The parents verified reciprocity in the relationships. Mutual enjoyment was confirmed, here exemplified by a description of a two friends and their commitment concerning their future plans:

P: They are interrelated. They are a couple. They want to stay together and they want to have dogs and an apartment... They are intending to work in a clothing store... They don't want to have children, and not any boyfriends. That's the plan.

In previous studies, mutual enjoyment has been defined as an ability to be involved in positive emotional exchanges through social interaction (Howes, 1983). Among these adolescents, social interaction provided opportunities for good experiences, which further strengthened their interest in sharing new enjoyable experiences. The adolescents experienced joy in shared activities, and they expressed feelings of happiness, similar to the findings of Webster and Carter (2013) in their study. Matheson et al. (2007) also found that teens were socially engaged in ways that provided satisfaction and that they wanted more of. The engagement seemed to be an expression of mutuality and mutual enjoyment.

### *Shared interactions*

Shared interests were the main basis of shared interactions in the current study. Shared interests appeared to be crucial for interaction. Some adolescents stressed that shared interactions had to involve multiple friends. Shared interactions also concerned future planning, particularly in relation to shared housing:

A: I will stay together with Hannah and with Lily.

I: When are you going to stay together?

A: When we grow up.

I: You have planned to share housing?

A: Yes.

From the parents' perspective, the interactions between the adolescents seemed to be more focused on common play and included less attention to closeness than in other relationships, more like "a boy-fellowship":

P: If you think about how boys are playing together, they simply do things; that is how they are playing together – they just do things. They are almost like boys.

However, in shared interactions, the parents described a type of a mutual equalization between them, which was particularly true for those who had younger, typically developed friends. The parents told how the adolescents attempted to find common contact points by themselves, which helped to maintain equalization in the friendship.

Shared interactions can be explained as the ability to engage in mutual and complementary play in which one's actions result in an expansion by the other and in which both parties are aware of the other's role (Howes, 1983). According to Bukowski et al. (1996), such interactions also involve mutual regard and experienced benefits. In the current study, there was more uncertainty concerning the extent to which the partners were aware of one another. Moreover, the parents described the shared interactions as "boy-fellowships", which is possibly a term that they did not often utilize with respect to other friendships. The interactions appeared to be focused on joint activities, which could possibly indicate a lesser degree of closeness in the relationships. The shared interactions in this case also involved relationships with younger, typically developed friends and were not as common among middle school-age friends. In addition, companionship is considered a basic feature of the friendship experience (Bukowski et al., 1994) and directly concerns the amount of voluntary time spent together. The shared interactions in this case were built on this companionship.

### *Care*

Care appeared to be of essential significance to the adolescents in their friendships. Care initially revolved around support, displaying care and standing up for one another:

I: Have you ever said to Leah that you feel sad?

A: Yes, she comforts me.

I: Does she comfort you? Do you think it helps?

A: Yes, it helps.

I: What does she say when she comforts you?

A: Oh, she says some different things, for example, I love you.

In addition, care was expressed by exchanging services, as confidence in the other, as an absence of negative behaviour and in terms of empathy. A number of characteristics of a good friend were emphasized:

- A good friend is someone who supports you when you are a little depressed.
- A good friend is one who can praise you. Then, you can acquire more self-confidence.

Help is one of the dimensions of the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS) developed by Bukowski et al. (1994), and it is described as a quality in a close friendship. Help refers to a friend's willingness to provide aid if another child is bothering him. Thus, caring also seems to revolve around help. Giving one another support and standing up for one another also involve protecting a friend. A number of the respondents in the current study related such examples when they were describing a real friendship. Thus, it appears that the term "care" is adequate for the dimension of help. Care is confirmed as a crucial feature by Jobling et al. (2000) in descriptions of how friends often take a counselling role opposite one another. In addition, caring may be of substantial significance in terms of reducing loneliness and strengthening the individual's quality of life.

### *Mutual trust*

In the present study, mutual trust was primarily about shared authority in the relationship and about security such that the relationship was sufficiently safe to risk quarrels, in addition to familiarity as an applicable topic.

Multiple adolescents noted that friends could occasionally be enemies. However, the advantage was that they became friends again:

I: What is silly if you become enemies?

A: Then, we are quarrelling.

I: What are you arguing about?

A: Slightly different things.

I: You are in disagreement?

A: Yes.

I: How does it become possible to be friends again?

A: Talking.

Parents confirmed mutual trust in these friendships:

P: They have known each other for quite a few years. I think she feels a kind of security in being with Edith. The other has no agenda, she is quite stable and safe, and they have some common interests; they don't care [at] all about what others think.

In the current study, familiarity appeared to be a theme that was either non-existent or that the adolescents did not understand. It could be a relevant topic, but it was presented differently.

The adolescents displayed trust in one another and possible mistrust. Some of the adolescents did not understand the word secret; others told stories of secrets and referred to secrets as a characteristic of their friendship:

I: What do you think is important to say about being a good friend?

A1: A secret.

A2: I can tell her some secrets.

A1: Yes.

A2: Usually at home, we talk behind the door, Tina (A1) and I, and she tends to be with me.

However, confidentiality was cited as a definition of a good friendship. The adolescents named particular people as their best friends and promised them everlasting friendship:

I: What is the best thing about a good friend?

A: When there is no one else, you always have someone to talk to. That's nice with Oliver; he is always present. It is very important with a good friend, having someone to talk to. It's kind of one of the most important things about having a good friend.

Parents described familiarity as a feature of friendship, but possibly not in an ordinary way. They talked about confidence in being themselves and freedom in the fellowship whereby mutual care was an element:

P: They are not familiar in that way, so they entrust each other or like that. However, when he is bored, then he can get support, and he is very good to comfort when others feel sorry. Then, he is on, at once, he runs away to put his arm around.

Mutual trust primarily concerns shared authority, familiarity in the relationship, and security, such as whether the relationship is sufficiently safe to risk quarrels. Familiarity appeared to be an expression of mutual trust, but in this case, a different type of familiarity. A lack of familiarity may possibly involve inadequate comprehension or friendship on a different plane, or it may be another form of intimacy than we usually see in friendships among the typically developed. In other words, a relationship that provides the opportunity to demonstrate care

and trust necessarily entails distinct elements of familiarity. In a study by McVilly et al. (2006), types of mutual trust and familiarity were assessed as some of the most valued qualities in friendships among adults with intellectual disabilities. The respondents asserted how a positive self-identity about being a person with intellectual disability could be a basis for friendship.

In the present study, security was considered another characteristic of mutual trust. In accordance with the FQS (Bukowski et al., 1994), security is based on two central features: the impression that friendships are secure and capable of continuing despite conflicts and the belief that people can rely on their friends. In many ways, security is an inadequate term for the specific qualities that the youngsters in this study emphasized in terms of mutual trust. The term “conflict” also may be included in mutual trust. In the FQS, conflict is correlated with continuity of the friendship relationship and indicates that there are disagreements in the relationship. Otherwise, conflict-management strategies have been found to be particularly relevant for quality and stability in friendship (Bowker, 2004). Success in friendship has thus been characterized by a good balance between being able to prevent conflict and standing up for one’s own rights when you disagree. Some of these respondents also showed how they tried to solve conflicts by talking about the current disagreements. Nevertheless, there is a question of to what extent they are really capable of maintaining such a balance with regard to conflict management in a friendship.

### *Bonding*

Bonding was a current topic among the adolescents, expressed by a number as closeness versus loss:

I: What do you think when you think about a good friend?

A1: If we are far from each other, missing the other and so on.

A2: The fact that we love each other.

A3: Keeping together.

A4: You want to be together, and when you are together, then you think about each other.

A5: It might be a bit like that, I miss Edith so much during holiday, and then I am very glad to hear that she's fine.

Such an emotional attachment was particularly prominent when friends were far away from one another, which precisely characterizes this type of bonding.

In the FQS (Bukowsky et al., 1994), closeness refers to the sense of affection that a child experiences with a friend and the strength of each one's bond with the other. In this study, an affective bond appeared to be most prominent. A bond was expressed by emotions via a dichotomy: closeness versus loss. The phenomena of belonging and attachment appear to be similar (Hall, 2010). Achieving belonging has been defined as an experience of attachment, feeling valued and having a sense of proximity to other people. The attachment might have an equal character of strength, but cognitive and linguistic limitations possibly prevented further reflection. Mutual trust and bonding may be two aspects of the same dimension. Mutual trust likely depends on an affective bond between two friends. Given a close attachment, it may also be possible to develop mutual trust within the friendship.



### *Reciprocal nomination*

In the present study, the adolescents were not asked to nominate one another. However, reciprocal nomination was a relevant theme among the parents in their descriptions of the adolescents' friendships.

Reciprocal nomination represented qualitative characteristics of friendship as reciprocal, long-term and genuine fellowship. A good friendship was not dependent upon a diagnosis.

Moreover, reciprocal nomination concerned mutual choices as best friends. A number of parents described a longstanding friendship that had lasted since the preschool years. The nomination could be independent of age level:

P: She is a year or two younger than our daughter. They became acquainted at the swimming club; they were very like that ... Thus it worked out, and I think there is an equal friendship. Absolutely.

However, friendship between adolescents with and without disabilities was also critically examined. The question concerned the duration of such relationships, such as how long the other would continue playing with dolls, or when the other might choose to withdraw because she had to take too much care.

The friendships among the adolescents could be similar to friendships among most young people. Parents described some friendships in which the interaction worked well, whereas in other cases, it did not. The adolescents found friends, and friendship was equally important to them, but occasionally in different ways than for the typically developed. Changes occurred during primary school:

P: Until fourth grade, parents mostly initiated friendship visits for all of the children. It was much more arranged. It was easier. Carol was invited with groups of friends, she was invited

to their homes, and it was much easier to collaborate with other parents; the visits were reciprocated. However, after fourth grade, it depended on the children's own initiative ... and then they forgot about Carol.

In general, the parents had concerns about friendships in the future. Maintaining the relationships was dependent on assistance and facilitation. The parents told how they extensively collaborated with other parents to help the youngsters to have the opportunity to be together.

Reciprocity is considered a crucial quality in friendship (Simpkins et al., 2006; Siperstein et al., 1997), but it is debatable to what extent mutual nomination is a prerequisite (Webster and Carter, 2013). Because the present study did not involve couples of friends, reciprocal nomination was not relevant. The adolescents were asked to define friendship qualities, but they were not asked whether their friendships were reciprocal. The other adolescent in the relationship might have provided another characteristic of their friendship. However, reciprocal nomination was emphasized by the parents. They told about reciprocal, long-term and genuine fellowship. Parents were cautious in commenting on their children's future friendships. Thus, the friendships were considered vulnerable, particularly for the youngsters with typically developed friends. The adolescents needed assistance in maintaining their friendships. It has been shown previously that despite increasing age, the parents of children with intellectual disabilities are often involved in assisting with establishing and maintaining friendships for their children, although such actions are no longer common among their peers (Mason et al., 2013; Matheson et al., 2007).

## *Discussion*

The present study is based on a sample of eleven adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities. The results indicate that from these adolescents' perspectives, the essential qualities of friendship are mutual preference, mutual enjoyment, shared interactions, care, mutual trust, and bonding. According to Howes (1983) and Bukowski et al. (1996), mutual preference, mutual enjoyment and shared interactions are considered prerequisites for claiming a friendship as close and true. Although the adolescents in the current study only display nuances to the signification of these concepts, one can nevertheless ascertain that the criteria for genuine friendships are at least partially present. However, themes such as care, mutual trust, familiarity and bonding also appeared to be relevant to closeness and reciprocity. A number of the adolescents were involved in long-term friendships; the duration of friendships was mentioned by a number of individuals both retrospectively and considering the future. Thus, these definitions partly met such conditions for friendship (Salmon, 2012).

The empirical findings that indicated the criteria of a close friendship seem to be fulfilled, albeit to a moderate degree. Closeness and reciprocity seem to be significant qualities in friendships among these adolescents. However, it appears that this result may not necessarily match the previous findings in this field (Heiman, 2000; Jobling et al., 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Siperstein et al., 1997; Tipton et al., 2013). Friendships of adolescents with intellectual disabilities have been characterized by less closeness and less positive reciprocity than in friendships of peers without disabilities, and they have been further characterized by the asymmetric distribution of roles and an absence of mutual engagement (Siperstein et al., 1997). What might cause this discrepancy? Might the explanation be differences in defining a close and mutual friendship, or might there be other causes? What forms the basis for such a friendship, in which equivalence may be a relevant factor?

As noted previously, Tipton et al. (2013) found a significant discrepancy in closeness and reciprocity between friends, with fewer adolescents with intellectual disabilities showing at least moderate warmth and closeness and at least moderately reciprocal friendships compared with their typical peers at the age of 13. These findings seem to be supported by other studies (Heiman, 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2011). Heiman (2000) showed that adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities stressed the characteristics of fun and entertainment, whereas adolescents without disabilities highlighted intimacy. Furthermore, few adolescents with intellectual disabilities were concerned with the emotional aspects of a close friendship compared with their typically developed peers.

The results of the study by Webster and Carter (2013) appear to be in accordance with those of Tipton et al. (2013). An evaluation of dyads that included children with intellectual disabilities and their three closest peers indicated that only some of the relationships appeared to be friendships that were characterized by the same components that are usually used to define friendships among the typically developed.

In comparison with friendships between children without learning problems, Siperstein et al. (1997) found that friendships between children with and without learning problems were characterized by limited collaboration and shared decision-making, less cooperative play, and an asymmetric division of roles.

Why are these results different? One explanation may be that there were differences in definitions. In Tipton's study (2013), warmth and closeness were defined as a desire to spend time with a friend that would include affection, joint play, and mutual like. Closeness was described as an ability to provide social support to each other. In addition, positive reciprocity was defined as the degree to which friends were equally invested and received mutual benefit from the relationship.

In view of the results of Tipton's study (2013), the results from the current sample possibly mean that concepts such as closeness and reciprocity may represent different phenomena among people with intellectual disabilities; for this reason, they are described in a characteristic manner. In the present study, the qualities are defined by the adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities. Closeness may be understood and expressed differently from other dimensions such as care, mutual trust, familiarity and bonding. However, close proximity seems to be less present in these relationships. For some, familiarity was crucial to their friendships. For others, familiarity was irrelevant.

It has been previously shown that for people with intellectual disabilities, friendship may have unusual characteristics such that these individuals may have a different understanding of the term "close friend" that may not necessarily be the same as that of their typically developed peers (Webster and Carter, 2013). These differences in descriptions may be due to limited vocabulary (Heiman, 2000). Thus, individuals with intellectual disabilities likely have fewer descriptions of friendship because of a limited ability to express their views of this phenomenon.

The results of friendship among those with intellectual disabilities may also deviate from the results among their typically developed peers because of different expectations and perceptions of friendship (Heiman, 2000; Jobling et al., 2000; Matheson et al., 2007; Siperstein et al., 1997; Webster and Carter, 2013). Individuals with intellectual disabilities define closeness as a property of friendship, although others might consider their friendships differently and possibly to a lesser degree.

Moreover, the parents in the present study characterized the friendships as "boy-fellowships" with less intimacy. Although closeness and intimacy seem to be fragile elements in these friendships, one nevertheless may ascertain that these phenomena are present. These themes

seem particularly relevant to an ability to provide one another social support and to what that means in terms of caring, empathy, trust and attachment (Hall, 2010; Jobling et al., 2000).

Another explanation may concern a distinction between friendships among young people with and without intellectual disabilities, and friendships characterized by greater equivalence. Salmon (2012) noted that disabled teens were able to establish long-lasting friendships. The results of the study by Estell et al. (2009) indicated that children with learning disabilities in elementary school were as likely to have a reciprocated best friend and had as many best friends as their typically developed peers. In the current sample, the respondents either had peers with intellectual disabilities or younger friends without disabilities. In the interviews, the adolescents did not relate to peers without intellectual disabilities.

Furthermore, reciprocal friendships in dyads in which one of the partners has learning problems may differ from other reciprocated friendships (Siperstein et al., 1997). In a comparison of dyads of children with and without learning problems and dyads of typically developed children, Siperstein et al. (1997) characterized the friendships that included children with learning problems as asymmetrical relationships with an absence of mutual engagement and an imbalance in roles. However, the children in that study reported the presence of reciprocal friends, which were explained as a type of diversity that exists in friendship and particularly in their expectations of friendship. Relationships in such dyads are often characterized by an imbalance in which one member of the dyad considers the other as different and in need of special assistance (Webster and Carter, 2014). In contrast, friendships between peers who have gone together in the same special school classes for numerous years have been more stable relationships (Matheson et al., 2007).

The adolescents in the present study described symmetrical relationships in which shared authority was a characteristic feature. Furthermore, the results showed that mutual behaviour,

mutual joy and mutual trust characterized these friendships. Thus far, this outcome would have corresponded to the results of the study by Siperstein et al. (1997). However, in the current study, the opposite was found. Unlike the results of Siperstein et al. (1997), the parents in this study verified the presence of reciprocity in the friendships. Reciprocal nomination is considered as an essential criterion for reciprocity in friendship (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995; Simpkins et al., 2006). Possibly reciprocal nomination is a key point in this discussion; it presupposes the experience of equality, which may not be fully accomplished in friendships between peers with and without intellectual disabilities.

Adolescents in the present study searched for equivalence in their relationships, some in friendships with peers with intellectual disabilities. Others succeeded in achieving a similar equivalence with younger, typically developed children. This result could partly explain why closeness and reciprocity both seemed to be present, although to a lesser degree.

Friendship was previously defined as a type of reciprocity contract between equals (Frønes, 2010). Frønes (2010) show that equality can only be learned through contact with equals, in particular by reference to the differences that exist between child-child relationships and adult-child relationships. For instance, relationships between children are characterized by similarity in position, similarity of situation and equality in the level of development, and both also assume that the other experiences the same similarities. The results of this study seem to support this line of reasoning. The adolescents tended to form friendships based on shared similarities, which was also observed in prior research (Meyer and Ostrosky, 2014; Salmon, 2012).

It seems that this quest to obtain equivalence partly reflects the choices of friends in this study. Moreover, it seems that the adolescents' reference frameworks with respect to friendship help to explain some of the diversity in outcomes concerning other studies on the same topic.

This study is based on only a few respondents with intellectual disabilities. Their descriptions express what they think entails a close friendship. The descriptions are based on their own perspectives considering qualities in friendship, although the descriptions are not comparable with others' understanding or general criteria for a close friendship. With respect to future research and practice in this field, these findings highlight qualities in friendship expressed by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities from their own points of view and thus emphasize the value and the need of including their own perspective by listening to their voices.

### ***Methodological limitations***

A number of methodological limitations may have weakened these results. One limitation may involve possible sources of error when teachers hands pick their own students to participate in a study. Teachers may have closeness in their relationships with the students in which possible prejudices can be a hurdle in the selection process. Teachers are not equipped to fully understand what such research is about, and thus, there is the possibility that teachers may include students who are not suited or exclude others who might have something to provide in such a study. Nevertheless, in consideration of the current inclusion criteria, the teachers were found to know the students best and were ultimately the most suitable for identifying who could fulfil the criteria.

When the medical diagnosis is unknown, there may be a limitation to the study when teachers are making the selection themselves. On another occasion, it could be easier to use a medical registry to aid the recruitment process.

A relatively small sample is also a methodological limitation. Two of the four schools had a large number of minority students. Although the parents were offered interpreter, it was



difficult to include students with non-western background. Insufficient skills in the Norwegian language were one of the reasons for lack of consent from parents in several cases. Eleven adolescents and the parents of only six of the eleven adolescents wanted to attend. However, the present study included 19 in-depth interviews with 17 respondents, which all provided descriptions with rich information. Furthermore, the study had a qualitative depth design that is not primarily intended for generalization but rather is meant to elaborate on and refine other findings from the same field.

Possibly, we might have obtained useful information by using observation as a supplement to the interviews in this case. However, this study did not intend to analyse the friendships. Moreover, the parents helped to confirm or disprove the statements of the adolescents, and the adolescents' mind maps contributed as documentation.

In addition to the information from the individual interviews, the purpose of the focus groups was to utilize the interaction between the participants. Nevertheless, the expected effect of the focus group did not materialize. Participants in the focus group began to emulate each other's statements, which did not open for a better communication between them, but rather contributed to weakening their interaction.

Otherwise, it appeared to be difficult to obtain a sample of dyads of friends because of previous scheduling. Thus, a study of many so-called friendship dyads through multiple focus group interviews could provide a mutual perspective. Reciprocity presupposes an examination of the phenomenon based on both partners in such dyads (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). Although descriptions of friendship are primarily expressed from an individual perspective, established theoretical concepts were used in this article. In addition, in this case, the confirmations of the parents appeared to provide an advantage. It remains not completely certain whether the parental reports concurred with what the young people themselves would

have said. Nevertheless, accordance between the parental statements and the content of the adolescents' definitions seems to be a strength of this study.

## **Conclusions**

Based on this study, some main qualities of friendship seem to be distinctive. The adolescents described experiences of friendship as companionship, shared interests, and enjoyment in fellowships but also as deeper qualities such as experiences of attachment, closeness and reciprocity. The parental descriptions confirmed reciprocity in those friend relationships that had been previously described.

Compared with their typically developed peers, it would appear that the criteria of close friendships are met for our respondents. The qualities that youngsters with mild intellectual disabilities described are relevant aspects of friendship. Even features such as closeness and intimacy were shown to be significant. However, it seems that in their experiences with friendships, these qualities are more fragile elements compared with others.

Previous research has highlighted that people with intellectual disabilities are less able to establish close friendships compared with the typically developed. The question therefore becomes: what might help to explain why these adolescents' descriptions actually partly meet the criteria of a close friendship? One explanation might be differences in definitions.

Closeness may be understood and expressed differently through other dimensions such as care, mutual trust, familiarity and bonding. However, close proximity seems to be less present in these relationships.

It has been previously shown that friendships among people with intellectual disabilities may entail an unusual understanding of the concept of friendship. The differences in their

descriptions may be due to limited language skills. They may struggle to provide descriptions of friendship because of a weaker capability to express themselves.

Another explanation for the divergent results may involve an orientation towards equality. The adolescents searched for equivalence in their relationships, and the results show that in that respect, they either chose friends with intellectual disabilities within their age group or younger, typically developed children.

This study partially suggested the assumptions that had been initially proposed. However, adolescents with intellectual disabilities seem to have lower or different expectations for friendship. Friendships among adolescents with intellectual disabilities may work similarly to friendships among younger children, and the explanation for this result appears to revolve around a desire for equivalence. The current study appears to define the assumption that friendship among adolescents with intellectual disabilities is less characterized by closeness and familiarity. Further detailed research studies are required.

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