Has the time finally come? Earlier intervention for promoting emotional resilience and well-being in children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism:

**Adapted, accessible FRIENDS for Life- Learning Disabilities (F4L-LD)**

By Jane Woodrow, Ana Alvey, Ro Rossiter

“As a Clinical Psychologist working with children and young people with learning disabilities, I loved being involved in the initial development project-adapting the activities from FRIENDS for Life and Fun FRIENDS through trying different materials and resources with young people, staff and families at Hazel Court School in Eastbourne in 2012. We learnt so much about what is possible to help children and young people with learning disabilities to learn to manage their feelings and build their confidence and resilience. This needs the support of the families, school and networks all working together.

We need to be doing much more of this type of work. In the current climate of the crisis in Children’s Mental Health Services, we need investment and support for developing the resources and the evidence that these approaches can work and they can help improve the lives of CYP with LD and their families.”

Jane Woodrow, Lead Clinical Psychologist, CAMHS LD/Family Intensive Support Service, Sussex Partnership Trust

As is well documented, children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism have higher rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties than those without. Despite policy and practice developments highlighting health and social inequalities and action to better meet their needs (e.g. NICE, Transforming Care, Paving the Way, Future in Mind), they still have less access to appropriate, coordinated mental and physical health care.

The Green Paper ‘Transforming children and young people’s mental health provision’ prioritises earlier intervention, prevention and the role of schools and colleges in mental health, with a particular focus on children in need and those with vulnerabilities and/or SEND. It highlights the need to develop resilience in view of its link with mental health is highlighted.

Hopefully this will be good news for children and young people with learning disabilities, their families and networks, and for the increased use of Special FRIENDS and FRIENDS for Life- Learning Disabilities (F4L-LD). Special FRIENDS and FRIENDS for Life- Learning Disabilities (F4L-LD) is a manualised intervention demonstrating real promise for promoting emotional resilience and well-being in children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

The UK has been leading the world in adapting, trialling and evaluating the use of FRIENDS with children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism. FRIENDS for Life is an evidence-
based, World Health Organization-endorsed programme which enables children and young people learn to identify and manage difficult thoughts and feelings, and overcome problems rather than avoid them. Since 2012, a collaborative of practitioners (clinical psychologists, nurses, speech and language therapists and assistants, teachers and the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities) have been adapting FRIENDS activities and developing resources in an appropriate and accessible format for children and young people with learning disabilities. We linked with a parallel development for children and young people with autism which led to the publication of the Special FRIENDS (Barrett, Smith and Slack 2015) and have delivered joint training since 2015.

FRIENDS for Life focuses on themes of, and builds skills in:

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

The FRIENDS acronym is a useful framework for remembering the skills.

The adaptations simplified concepts and content, increased visual resources and reduced verbal aspects and increased the number of sessions from the original 10 hour long sessions, plus 2 booster sessions and 2 parent/carer sessions, to at least 12. Some FRIENDS for Life – Learning Disabilities and Special FRIENDS run for more sessions, some have more frequent and shorter sessions.

Following successful Special FRIENDS and FRIENDS.LD co-facilitator training and Community of Practice development days since 2015 (some supported by a NHSE Transforming Care for Children grant to the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (FPLD)), a revised guide was launched - FRIENDS for Life: Building Resilience and Emotional Well-being: Practical Guidance on Adapting FRIENDS for Life to Increase Participation For Children and Young People with Learning Disabilities. [https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/our-work/employment-education/friends-for-life](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/our-work/employment-education/friends-for-life)

The revised guidance includes a section “Catering for a wide range of needs” with tips based on use of adapted FRIENDS activities with whole class groups with a range of abilities (more profound and multiple learning disabilities through severe learning disabilities to talkative, lively pupils with autism)

Feedback from Special FRIENDS/FRIENDS for Life-LD training and the Community of Practice shows that professionals and parents learn skills to deliver the intervention. The learning from FRIENDS for Life-LD and Special FRIENDS can enhance quality of life for children and young people with learning
disabilities and/or autism, and their families. It could also reduce the need for more specialist support in the future.

Since 2015, over 120 people from around the United Kingdom and from a range of professional backgrounds, and parents, have attended Special FRIENDS/FRIENDS.LD training and developed our Community of Practice. Special FRIENDS and FRIENDS.LD use in schools and services as groups, and sometimes individual interventions, is growing. With pressure on funding and the needs of children and young people with learning disabilities overlooked - there's still a long way to go.

A teacher who delivered Special FRIENDS, expressed delight at the positive changes in the pupils attending the sessions e.g. use of newly acquired coping skills, less signs of challenging behaviour, fewer incidents of walking out of lessons, generalisation of methods to deal with their anxiety in other lessons

“This incredible training has enabled me to support my child with ASD in identifying the emotions and feelings associated with his anxiety. He can now label them and find appropriate strategies to cope with them - absolute game changer. Behaviours related to anxiety have reduced hugely. I will be advocating for this to be rolled out countywide. All schools and settings need this programme for all children.”

A parent who attended the training

A young man using breathing exercises to reduce nervousness before being a ring bearer for his sister’s wedding

One said the breathing would help him when going for college interviews

Another uses the new skills when he is upset with his brother and goes to his room to cool down at home.

Specific feedback from young people who took part

“As an undergraduate Psychology student on placement, I have the opportunity to attend the FRIENDS-LD and Special FRIENDS training and assisted planning FRIENDS-LD sessions and resources development and organisation with St Nicholas, a special school in Kent, and for the wider Community of Practice. I have a keen interest in mental health and well-being, in particular how we can assist children and young people to improve their well-being.

From my experience with children and young people, especially those with additional needs, I believe it’s necessary to improve children’s access to emotional teaching and cognitive therapies. I definitely think the FRIENDS programmes and the adapted programme for learning disabilities and autism should be taught more widely, especially in more schools because I think it’s so important to equip children and young people with strategies to deal with their emotions.”

Anastasia Alvey, Psychology Student on Placement, Children’s Assessment Centre, Canterbury

For those interested in attending Special FRIENDS/FRIENDS.LD training courses facilitated by licensed FRIENDS for Life trainers, Gemma Slack and Orlaith Donnelly, visit: www.thepsychologytree.com