Self-assessment of friendships and social inclusion of adults with intellectual disabilities

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Introduction. Persons with intellectual disabilities often experience difficulties in achieving interpersonal relations and social inclusion, which are important aspects of quality of life. *Objectives*. This paper aims to examine the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities on friendships and social inclusion and identify factors which influence their development, with the ultimate goal of defining recommendations for improving support. *Methods*. A qualitative research approach was chosen to gain insight into participants' subjective experiences and views. For this purpose, an individual semi-structured interview was conducted with eight adults with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. *Results*. Participants generally express satisfaction with their friendships and social involvement. They spend time with friends, mostly in the centre, where they are included in the daily program. They especially emphasize the importance of the emotional support they receive from friends. In addition to activities in the daily centre, participants play sports, but they spend most of their free time at home. The factors that negatively affect their social inclusion and friendships are overly protective parents, living conditions, and low motivation. The factors that promote both are parental support, the use of social media, and visiting different places in the community. *Conclusion*. Although participants are mostly satisfied with their friendships and social inclusion, they also express different needs. Being included in the daily centre has a positive impact on developing friendships and social inclusion, but at the same time, it is necessary to offer inclusive content in society and provide both formal and informal support in this area.

Keywords: friendships, social inclusion, intellectual disabilities, disability

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Introduction

Friendship is one of the greatest life values. A human is a social being and, as such, needs close relations with other people (Borčinović, 2009). Moreover, quality friendships lead to better mental health, greater resistance to stress, and better quality of life (Huić & Smolčić, 2016).

Research confirms that friends of people with intellectual disabilities (ID) have a vital role in their life (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Knox & Hickson, 2001; Morris, 2001; Zlatarić, 2014) and that spending time together makes them happy (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). In addition to the family, friends represent the most important informal support in empowering people with ID, creating a positive image of themselves, and realizing valued social roles. Being a friend is one of the most important roles in their lives (Zlatarić, 2014). Some characteristics of friendships differ between the typical population and the population of people with ID. It has been shown that people with ID have fewer friends than the general population (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018), friends are harder to find (Morris, 2001), friendships are most often made with people who also have intellectual disabilities (Callus, 2017; Emerson & McVilly, 2004; Knox & Hickson, 2001), and they assess these friendships with lower levels of quality, closeness, and positive reciprocity (Tipton et al., 2013). They participate in a limited number of joint activities that most often occur in public (Emerson & McVilly, 2004) and are related to organized services for people with disabilities (Callus, 2017). Some people with ID equate friends with family members and roommates (Bigby, 2008), while others clearly distinguish friendly from other types of relations (Callus, 2017; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Knox & Hickson, 2001). Many factors influence the establishment of friendly connections for people with ID, and the support of professional staff and family is the most important factor (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018). Other factors are living situation, attitudes of the society, independence, the possibility of control over own life (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018), the level of adaptive behaviour (Emerson & McVilly, 2004), additional difficulties (Morris, 2001), and social skills (Little et al., 2019).

In the research by Fulford and Cobigo (2018), people with ID emphasized that life in the community, i.e., outside institutions, with the availability of a greater number of services and support programs and where it is possible to meet new people, facilitates the development and maintenance of friendships. This is where general social inclusion and the development of friendship establish a close connection. The concept of social inclusion has many components. The most important is belonging to a community that represents its own sense of real connection with the social and physical environment and the resources and services it provides (Hall, 2017). People with ID describe social inclusion as social acceptance, the possibility of using community services and having opportunities for contacting and meeting new people (Abbott & McConkey, 2006).

A lot of studies (Hall, 2017; Merrells et al., 2019; Minton et al., 2002) talk about the unsatisfactory level of social inclusion of people with ID, which is also confirmed by some Croatian research (Leutar et al., 2014; Bratković et al., 2018). Older people, people living with parents and in a housing institution are at a greater risk of social exclusion (Minton et al., 2002). On the other hand, there are positive consequences of the independent living movement (Bratković et al., 2018). In Croatia, various legal acts have been adopted that encourage the inclusion of people with disabilities in the community in the last few decades, such as strategic plans for deinstitutionalization and transformation of social welfare homes and the Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of People with Disabilities NN 157/13 (NN 32/20). Various social services are provided, such as organized housing and personal assistance, but the capacities are limited and insufficient for the needs and number of people. A big problem is the lack of transition programs oriented towards involvement in the community and employment, which is why, after finishing school, the only option for many people with ID are daily programs, with limited opportunities for real social participation and community living.

Social inclusion is correlated with the quantity and quality of social support networks, often lower in people with ID than in a typical population (Forrester-Jones et al., 2006; Lippold & Burns, 2009; McCausland et al., 2017). Factors that positively affect social inclusion are educational opportunities, employment, good physical health, being informed about community services (Leutar et al., 2014), involvement in NGO programs (Zlatarić, 2014) and participation in meaningful activities (van Asselt-Goverts, 2015). Some factors which have a negative impact are overprotective family members and professional staff, life in rural areas, and the inability to use public transport (Abbott & McConkey, 2006).

Some studies show the positive impact of friendship on achieving social inclusion (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018), and vice versa (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Zlatarić, 2014).

With increasing interest in these research topics, many studies still rely primarily on collecting data from an environment that knows people with ID well, i.e., their parents/guardians and/or support staff. Despite inclusive tendencies, there is a small number of studies that include the subjective perception of these persons (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; Callus, 2017; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018), although many of them can give self-statements.

Therefore, this paper aims to examine the perspective of people with ID on friendships and social inclusion, to identify the factors that make it easier or more difficult for them to achieve this, and possible ways of improving systematic and informal support of the environment in this area. Consistent with that aim, the following research questions were defined: *1) How do adults with ID define and experience friendships and their significance? 2) What are*

the personal experiences of adults with ID in terms of making and maintaining friendships? 3) In what ways and to what extent are adults with ID involved in their community? 4) How do personal and environmental factors affect the development and maintenance of friendships and social inclusion of adults with ID?

Methods

Participants

Given the purpose of this research, the most appropriate method was intentional sampling. The criteria for selecting participants were the presence of a mild or moderate intellectual disability and the absence of significant communication difficulties that would make it impossible to conduct an individual interview. The study included eight adults with ID aged 29 to 50, four females and four males. Four participants have mild intellectual disability and four have moderate intellectual disability. According to the available documentation, four participants were diagnosed with additional diagnoses of mental health problems. All participants are users of the daily centre for rehabilitation and work activities at one NGO in Zagreb, the capital of the Republic of Croatia, so all participants know each other. Every day, they spend several hours in the daily centre where they participate in various occupational, creative, and sports activities. They all live in their family home with their parents or other family members. One participant has a partner, but only meets them at sports training which they attend together. None of them is employed, and only one participant helps in a family business.

Data Acquisition

A qualitative approach and a method of the individual semi-structured interview were applied to gain an in-depth insight into the experiences and views, i.e., the subjective perspective of the participants with ID. Due to the COVID-19 epidemiological measures, all interviews were held in the quiet open space in front of the NGO, where the participants felt more relaxed and safer and did not have to wear masks. Every interview took about an hour. Before conducting the interview, the authors of the paper created an Interview guide with main questions (Table 1) and specific sub-questions based on the key subjects described in studied literature about friendships and social inclusion of people with ID. The questions were formed in an easy-to-understand way, with simple words and short sentences and were further adapted to each participant as needed (explained in other words, repeated, different terms used, supplemented with examples). Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. After the interviews, the participants received certificates of appreciation for their participation and contribution to the research.

Table 1

The main questions (without sub-questions) asked in the interview

General information	1.	How old are you?
	2.	Where do you live?
	3.	Who do you live with / who else lives with you?
	4.	Which people are important in your life?
Everyday activities	1.	What do you do at home with your housemates?
	2.	In which activities do you participate in the daily centre and with whom?
Social inclusion	1.	What are you doing in your free time?
	2.	Who do you spend your free time with?
	3.	Do you go to the store / shopping and what do you buy?
	4.	Do you use public transport?
	5.	Do you go to church / participate in religious activities?
	6.	Do you use a mobile phone, a computer and the Internet?
	7.	What kind of relations do you have with your neighbours?
	8.	Do you think you are sufficiently involved in your community?
Friendships	1.	What does a good friend mean to you?
	2.	Do you have friends?
	3.	How do you know that these people are your friends?
	4.	How do you spend time with your friends?
	5.	Do you like hanging out with friends?
	6.	Do you sometimes have problems with your friends, disagree or argue?
	7.	Do you socialize with friends outside the daily centre?
	8.	How did you keep in touch with friends during the coronavirus pandemic?
	9.	How do you find new friends?
	10.	Did you have any friends with whom you are no longer in touch?
	11.	Would you like to have more friends / meet new friends?
	12.	Would you like something to change about your friendships?

Respect for Ethical Principles

Compliance with the Code of Conduct while selecting the participants and collecting data was ensured in several ways. A support person, an employee of the centre, presented the aim and methods of the research to users who met the selection criteria, and only those who showed interest were involved in the research. The Agreement between researchers and research participants was created in which the topic of the research, the procedure for conducting interviews, and the obligations and

rights of participants and researchers were presented in a written form accessible to persons with ID, using simple words written in capital letters, the text divided in short paragraphs, and corresponding pictures.

Data Analysis

A qualitative framework analysis was used for data processing (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, according to Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). With regard to the principles of this method, the following steps were carried out. Interview data were transcribed almost literally with some verbal content editing that was irrelevant for further analysis. Five subject areas were identified according to the research questions: *experience and significance of friendships*, *personal experiences in friendships*, *social inclusion*, *factors that make it difficult to develop friendships and social inclusion*, and *factors that promote the development of friendships and social inclusion*. The following process consisted of the following steps: identifying the topics, coding the statements, classifying the codes into tables according to the topics, and defining the corresponding categories.

Results

Table 2 shows the key results of the qualitative analysis, divided into subject areas, topics and categories.

Table 2

Subject areas, topics and categories obtained from the qualitative analysis

Subject area	Topics and categories
The experience and significance of friendships	The importance of friendships • *Socializing; Mental health; Closeness; Missing during separation; A sense of self-worth* Desirable characteristics of friends • *Having time for other person; Honesty; Respect; Helping; Listening; Sincerity; Politeness; Communicativeness; Likeability; Optimism; Non-argumentativeness; Inner qualities, not outer appearance; Giving praise* Undesirable characteristics of friends • *Argumentativeness; Disrespect; Unreliability; Jealousy; Gossip; Disinterest; Insincerity; Lateness; Annoyance; Lack of empathy*

Subject area	Topics and categories
Personal experiences in friendships	Celebrating birthdays • *With friends; With family; In the Association* Meeting friends • *In the Association; Neighbourhood; School; Leisure activities; Through other people* Joint activities with friends • *Socializing in the Association; Conversations; Walks; Going to cafes; Going to shopping centres; Going to the cinema; Visiting each other; Sport activities; Joking; Summer break* Mutual peer support • *Physical support; Emotional support; Care for health* Quarrels and disagreements • *Quarrels with friends; Quarrels with a partner* Wishes for the future • *Frequency of socializing; Number of friends; Common activities; Behaviour change*
Social inclusion	Realization of valued social roles • *Sports achievements; The role of the teacher; Participation in the family business; Independence in carrying out activities of daily life* Involvement in the Association • *Satisfaction; Activities* Organized leisure activities • *Swimming; Athletics* Free time at home • *Relaxation; Hanging out with family; Creative activities; Sport activities* Free time in the community • *Walks around the city; Going to the cinema; Walks in nature; Attending social events; Sport activities; Going to cafes; Going to church* Interpersonal relations • *Family members; Partners; Neighbours; Other people from the local community* Travel • *Traveling around the city; Excursions with the Association; Family trips* Use of modern technology • *Communication by mobile phone; Communication through social networks; Fun; Learning new skills* Wishes for the future • *Employment; Sport activities; Meeting famous people; Travelling; Using a computer*

Subject area	Topics and categories
Factors that make it difficult to develop friendships and social inclusion	Protective relationship of the family • *Prohibitions; Disrespect for autonomy and the right to choose* Own initiative and motivation Factors related to friends • *Lack of time to socialize; Starting their own families; The rare existence of true friends; Death of a friend* Lack of employment opportunities • *Inappropriate working hours; Deprivation of legal capacity* Physical environment • *Material conditions; Physical distance* Extraordinary circumstances (coronavirus and earthquakes) • *Cessation of participation in the usual activities; Negative feelings*
Factors that promote the development of friendships and social inclusion	Parental support • *Providing transport; Allowing socializing; Making adaptations* Social networks • *Keeping in touch during the coronavirus; The possibility of meeting new friends on the Internet* Meeting new friends in the community

The Experience and Significance of Friendships

Three topics were distinguished within this area: the importance of friendships, desirable and undesirable characteristics of friends, each with its own categories.

The results show that the participants' friends take a very important place in life, and socializing with them contributes to their mental health and lifts their mood: *"It is good to have company. To hang out, you are not alone." (3); "A friend will cheer you up, hang out with you, you can talk about love, football..." (5).* They appreciate the inner qualities of their friends more than their appearance: *"I look at the spirit, I don't care about the appearance, I care about what kind of man you are inside, not outside... Spirit, warmth, heart, that is the essence of a human." (5).* The desirable traits include honesty, sincerity, decency, non-contentiousness, respect, willingness to help and listen, likability, optimism, communicativeness, giving praise, and taking time for the other person. On the other hand, the undesirable traits are contentiousness, disrespect, unreliability, disinterest, jealousy, lack of empathy, dishonesty, duplicity, boredom, and being late.

Personal Friendships Experiences

The topics arising from the conversation about the participants' personal experiences related to friendships are celebrating birthdays, meeting friends, joint activities, mutual peer support, quarrels and disagreements, and wishes for the future.

The participants generally have a small number of friends: most say three-four friends, being very close to one or two of them. Together, they spend time in the usual friendly activities such as talking to each other, walking around the city, going to cafes, shopping centres and cinemas, and doing sports activities.

It is specific for these participants that they usually socialize on the premises of the association in which they spend their time every day, and less outside of it. This information is further confirmed by the fact that participants usually do not see their friends during the summer months (vacation). Moreover, they rarely visit each other at home. They also, in their own judgment, rarely quarrel with their friends. The arguments are short-lasting, and friends make up quickly. When they talk about helping each other, they distinguish between physical support in everyday life and emotional support, which they emphasize as particularly important: *"So that you can confide in him, have a shoulder to cry on, cheer you up when you are sad, hang out, tell a secret and so on." (5)*. The topic they often mentioned that proved to be very important to them is the celebration of birthdays with friends.

All participants made friends in the daily centre, which is also the place where they made the most friends. Some clearly separate friends from the daily centre with whom they socialize in their free time from other members. However, one participant believes all members of the centre are their friends just because they are all a part of it. Friends outside the association are most often those they met earlier in school, on leisure activities, or through acquaintances and neighbours. Significantly, some of them do not have any friends outside the association.

Although they are mostly satisfied with their friendships, they also express wishes for improving the relations in the future: *"To go out with them more often." (1); "…to have more friends." (3); "To change their behaviour, not to be angry with each other." (4)*. It should be noted, however, that some participants do not want any changes regarding their friendships and are satisfied with the current situation.

Social inclusion

In the Social inclusion thematic area, there are as many as nine topics: realization of valued social roles, involvement in the association, organized leisure activities, free time at home, free time in the community, interpersonal relations, travel, use of modern technology, and wishes for the future.

As said previously, all participants are members of the daily centre, where they spend several hours a day doing various work, creative, sports, and other activities. Apart from these usual activities, the association allows members to participate in various community events. The participants spend most of their free time at home but often go for walks with their family members and friends or alone; they go to cafes, cinemas, and social events and engage in sports. Most of them are involved in sports activities, e.g., in a swimming and/or athletic club, and participate in competitions. They say they mostly have very good close relationships with family members and relatives. However, they also mention positive and negative experiences with neighbours and other people they meet in the community. All participants use public transport independently, which significantly helps them move around the city. Excursions and trips outside the city, which they talked about, are organized mainly by the association, and furthermore, they go on holidays with their families. Everyone uses digital technology, some to communicate with others, and some for entertainment, i.e., playing games, watching videos, series and movies, listening to music, etc. Everyone except one participant has a mobile phone. One out of these seven participants uses it only for talking to their parents, but others also use it to communicate with their friends, mainly over social networks. They perform various socially valued roles that are important to them, most often emphasizing their sporting achievements, work and creative skills, and skills that enable being independent in daily life activities and being equal family members: *"We were in Zadar, I won three silver medals. I also won gold before, I have about 50-something medals."* (5); *"I go to the store alone when my mom needs something..."* (1).; *"We went to schools to teach children felting. It was good. Because we were the teachers, we taught."* (1). None of the participants is formally employed, but one is involved in a paid family business. Participants' wishes related to improving social inclusion are employment, going on trips, meeting famous people, and developing sports and computer skills: *"We thought about inclusion, my mom and I, but I don't know if I should get a job."* (3); *"Well, I'd like to get a little more involved in some sports. Here is my favourite wish: I would like to do cycling."* (6).

The Impact of Personal and Environmental Factors on the Development and Maintenance of Friendships and Social Inclusion

Factors that Make It Difficult to Develop Friendships and Social Inclusion

The following topics emerged from this thematic area: protective relationship of the family, own initiative and motivation, factors related to friends, lack of employment opportunities, physical environment, and extraordinary circumstances (coronavirus and earthquakes).

According to the self-statements of the participants, one of the main factors that negatively affects their social inclusion and friendships is the protective relationship of the family. Such a relationship is mainly related to the degree of independence of the person and is, in some cases, justified. However, sometimes it happens that family members unjustifiably deny a person with ID their right to choose. Their ability to socialize with friends is also limited by the characteristics of the physical environment, i.e., poor living conditions and a great distance between their homes. Some of the reasons for ending friendships are related to the characteristics of friends, the founding of their families, the lack of time for socializing, and the death of a friend. Their initiative and motivation, as well as the individual's traits and lifestyle, play a major role in making friends and engaging in community activities. For example, some of them describe themselves as not communicative and do not express desire to hang out with friends a lot. Participants also discussed problems with the lack of employment opportunities, deprivation of legal capacity, and unadjusted working conditions. Regarding the extraordinary circumstances they faced, the participants emphasized the impossibility of seeing friends and participating in the usual activities due to the coronavirus pandemic and earthquakes that affected the City of Zagreb: *"I would like corona to be over so that we can hang out normally in the evening, so that we can hug and kiss normally, be more cheerful..." (6).*

Factors that Promote the Development of Friendships and Social Inclusion

This thematic area was divided into three topics: parental support, social networks, and meeting new friends in the community.

Parental support has proven to be a very important factor in making and maintaining friendships and improving social inclusion. Parents support participants in several ways: by providing transportation, having a positive attitude towards participants seeing their friends, and designing adjustments that contribute to participants' autonomy in everyday life. The use of social networks contributes to friendships by enabling regular contact with existing friends and meeting new ones: *"We talked online in the group chat." (3); "...you can meet a new friend or more friends through it." (4).* The participants feel that the opportunity to make new friends also increases by visiting different places in the community.

Discussion

This research confirmed the findings of previous studies (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Knox & Hickson, 2001; Morris, 2001; Zlatarić, 2014) that friendships are very important to people with ID. The essential element of friendships for the participants is socializing. It has a good effect on their mental health and awakens positive feelings in them, as opposed to isolation.

The participants describe friendships not so differently from people without disabilities, which is also in line with previous findings (Callus, 2017; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Knox & Hickson, 2001). They emphasize enjoying joint activities and mutual support as the important qualities of friendships. They care about their friends' character, not their appearance. Brackenridge and McKenzie (2005) also state that people with ID deem personality traits the most important in friends, and the ones that determine whether they like the other person or not. The participants spend time with their friends doing the common friendly activities that usually take place in public spaces, which was also covered in the research by Emerson and McVilly (2004).

The specificity of this research is that all participants are members of the same association (daily centre), and this is where they met most of their friends. Some participants rarely see their friends outside the association and joint sports activities. Furthermore, although most have friends outside the association, several participants consider the association members their only friends and communicate with each other only during joint activities in the association. Fulford and Cobigo (2018) also mention that people with ID are often out of touch with their friends when they are physically separated. From all the above, we observe the positive effect of involvement in the day centre service on developing and maintaining friendships.

On the other hand, the fact that these associations/daily centres are segregated because they are intended exclusively for people with disabilities could be considered harmful. This reduces the opportunities for meeting and establishing relationships with people without disabilities. Bigby and Fyffe (2009) believe that the connections that people with ID make with other people with disabilities should not be neglected because each relationship brings some benefits. Of course, this does not mean we should not encourage expanding the social network and providing people with ID opportunities for new experiences and relationships with others in the community. Only when this is ensured can they make decisions more comprehensively, express their interests, and make better judgments about satisfaction with social inclusion and relationships.

Some participants expressed wishes regarding the scope and quality of friendship, but others are satisfied with the current situation and do not express the need for more friends or frequent encounters, which should be respected. As Bigby and Fyffe (2009) say, not all people are outgoing; some prefer to spend time alone or at home rather than in the community. However, we should remember that this can be the consequence of a lack of skills, experiences or insights into better possibilities.

As this research has shown, involvement in the day centre positively impacts general social inclusion. Almost all participants are involved in organized sports activities, which they most often joined after becoming members of the association, encouraged by the involvement of other members.

For some, hanging out with friends is the main reason for attending sports training.

Although it is objectively devastating that none of them, as graduated adults, had the possibility of employment, independence, or starting their own family, the participants are satisfied with realizing some other valued social roles that they consider very important. Thus, for example, they emphasize their admirable sports results, work, creativity, teaching skills, everyday life skills they use to contribute to their families, and other roles they are proud of and for which they are valued.

The participants show a high level of autonomy in using public transport, going to the store, and using money, which significantly contributes to better social inclusion. The use of public transport also makes seeing friends easier (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). As Abbott and McConkey (2006) pointed out, learning everyday life skills is one possible way of reducing barriers to social inclusion.

The use of digital technology has proven to be the most common way of communicating and maintaining contact with friends, especially during restrictive epidemiological measures due to the pandemic of coronavirus.

Although the causal link cannot be reliably determined, it is interesting that participants who use less or no social networks and cell phones for texting are the same ones who see friends less often in their spare time and vice versa. Similarly, it could be observed from talking with the participants that several who have fewer friends and socialize with them less often also cite fewer joint activities in the community. On the other hand, we can assume that people who spend more time in the community automatically have a greater chance to make friends. Of course, we cannot conclude with certainty whether the achieved friendships have a positive effect on social inclusion or the opposite, but the previous research speaks in favour of a mutual positive impact (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018; Zlatarić, 2014).

The results of this research indicate specific factors that contribute to or prevent the development of friendships and social inclusion of people with ID. One of the most significant is parental support or, on the other hand, overprotection. There is a need to make more appropriate services available and improve the quality of support by applying person- and family-centred planning models. In this context, it is necessary to educate and encourage parents to provide more opportunities for their adult children with ID to participate in making choices and decisions in everyday life.

Although work plays an important role in every person's life, there are many problems and reduced employment opportunities for people with ID. Instead, they are in the social welfare system. Bratković et al. (2019) confirm the numerous benefits of employment of these persons, which also contribute to their social inclusion, from involvement in purposeful activities and the realization of socially valued roles to the expansion of the social network.

Research Limitations

There are several research limitations that may have influenced the obtained results obtained. First, all participants express willingness to talk about their friendships and social inclusion, they are members of the same association, i.e., social service in the form of a daily program, and most of them also participate in jointly organized leisure activities. In addition, all participants live in their family homes and are residents of a large urban environment, which brings numerous advantages related to the available public infrastructure, such as transport connectivity and various services and public events. Therefore, future research should include more participants with different living and daily activities experiences, as well as demographic characteristics. Since this qualitative research was done on a small sample, it is important to emphasize that the results cannot be generalized to the broader population of people with ID. Although this paper considers the experiential perspective of people with ID as the most important, for more accurate insights, it is important to compare the perspective of people from their immediate environment, especially for people with a higher degree of disability.

Conclusion

"I think having a friend is great for your brain. With no friends, we would die. It is not good not to have friends." (5) There are one of the participants' statements that confirm the importance of friendships for people with ID. The results of the analysis show that friends most often hang out in the day centre and do not often visit at home. They rarely quarrel and especially value the emotional support of their friends. Birthday celebrations with friends are particularly important to them.

Involvement in the day centre has a positive impact on general social inclusion, because, through the association, people with ID participate in various events. In addition, encouraged by the participation of other users of the day centre, they joined sports activities during which they socialize with friends.

None of them is employed, married or has children, but the participants fulfil other valued social roles, such as achieving enviable sports results, independence in everyday life, independence in using public city transport, going to the store and using money, etc, which are essential elements for achieving better social inclusion. Social support in this research has also proved to be a particularly significant, if not indispensable, factor in the development of social connections and relationships of people with ID.

It is evident that programs and organized activities intended for people with ID, such as those offered by NGOs and sports clubs, contribute to the realization of friendships and social inclusion. However, the results open a number of

questions related to the full realization of social inclusion and connections with people who are not users of the centres, including people without disabilities. Apart from the unquestionable need for further development of such resources, there is also an even greater need for designing inclusive, non-segregating content and services in society. One of the main prerequisites of independent living is the development of a supported employment model and other innovative programs where people with ID can expand their autonomy, informal circle of support and friendships. Through different projects in the local community, people with ID can be encouraged to individually engage in activities of interest intended for all citizens, e.g., organized leisure activities, cultural and sports events in the community, volunteering, etc. Frequent socializing is important for making friends, so it is necessary to encourage a person to get involved in activities that are held regularly or more than once, where they will see the same people and develop a relationship with them. Furthermore, there is great significance in using digital technology for maintaining communication with friends and following events in the community. Generally, we need more initiatives and proactive operations based on the principles of socially responsible community mobilization.

In addition, it is necessary to create specific programs for empowering people with ID to build friendships, with a special emphasis on improving communication, social and emotional competencies. The education of experts and family members of people with ID is of particular importance, on the one hand, aimed at raising awareness of the significance of friendships and social inclusion for the individual's quality of life, and on the other, at creating strategies for providing support in this field.

It can be concluded that to improve interpersonal relations, especially friendships, and social inclusion of people with ID, it is important to simultaneously work on the further development and improvement of systems and quality of support towards more inclusive and independent living opportunities, on educating the environment and sensitizing society, as well as on building and strengthening personal competences of people with ID. In doing so, it is necessary and must not be neglected to respect the personal perspective and encourage the self-determination of people with ID, to realize their aspirations, wishes, needs, and rights fully, both in this and other life areas.

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Samoprocena prijateljstva i socijalne inkluzije odraslih osoba sa teškoćama u intelektualnom funkcionisanju

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Uvod: Osobe sa teškoćama u intelektualnom funkcionisanju se često suočavaju sa poteškoćama u razvoju međuljudskih odnosa i socijalne inkluzije, koji su važni činioci kvaliteta života. *Cilj:* Ovaj rad ima za cilj da ispita perspektivu osoba sa teškoćama u intelektualnom funkcionisanju o prijateljstvu i socijalnoj inkluziji i da identifikuje faktore koji utiču na njihov razvoj, sa krajnjim ciljem definisanja preporuka za unapređenje podrške. *Metode:* Odabran je kvalitativni istraživački pristup kako bi se stekao uvid u subjektivna iskustva i stavove učesnika. U tu svrhu je sproveden individualni polustrukturirani intervju sa osam odraslih osoba sa lakim i umerenim stepenom intelektualne ometenosti. *Rezultati:* Učesnici, generalno, izražavaju zadovoljstvo svojim prijateljstvima i društvenom uključenošću. Vreme uglavnom provode sa prijateljima u centru, gde su uključeni u dnevni program. Posebno ističu važnost emocionalne podrške koju primaju od prijatelja. Pored aktivnosti u dnevnom centru, učesnici se bave sportom, ali većinu slobodnog vremena provode kod kuće. Faktori koji negativno utiču na njihovu socijalnu inkluziju i sklapanje prijateljstava su: prezaštićujući odnos roditelja, uslovi života i njihova niska motivacija. Faktori koji promovišu i jedno i drugo su podrška roditelja, upotreba društvenih medija i posete različitim mestima u zajednici. *Zaključak:* Iako su učesnici uglavnom zadovoljni kvalitetom prijateljstava i socijalnom uključenošću, oni izražavaju različite potrebe. Uključivanje u dnevne centre pozitivno utiče na razvoj prijateljstva i socijalne inkluzije, ali je istovremeno potrebno ponuditi inkluzivne sadržaje u zajednici, te pružiti formalnu i neformalnu podršku u ovoj oblasti.

Ključne reči: prijateljstvo, socijalna inkluzija, osobe sa teškoćama u intelektualnom funkcionisanju, invalidnost