

A PHILLY FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE PRIMER

Friendship is Fundamental

A simple, time-tested intervention for at-risk youth with and without disabilities, neurodivergence, and mental health challenges



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A Public Health Emergency: Our national loneliness epidemic

"If I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice."

This chilling sentiment is taken from the opening letter by Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, in U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on our country's epidemic of loneliness. It's a sentiment he heard over and over as he traveled to speak with residents throughout the country.

Colloquially, we envision loneliness as an emotional state—which it is—but less often as a physical state, which it also is, in ways that profoundly affect individual mental and physical health in the short and long term.

But while the statistics on our epidemic of loneliness are shocking and disturbing, it's important to note the hopeful subtitle of the paper: "The Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community."

For over twenty years, Philly Friendship Circle has been using the powerful tool of friendship as a fulcrum for change. We improve life outcomes for the often marginalized or lonely disabled and non-disabled peers that we serve, giving support and respite to their families, and creating a culture of true inclusivity.

We envision a world in which all people, including those with special needs and their families, experience acceptance, inclusion, and friendship. We choose to see each person as a soul with infinite potential and abilities, and we are proud to support and celebrate everyone's unique needs.

When serving our community, we start with the bedrock principle of "love your fellow as yourself," (Leviticus 19:18). In creating authentic friendships, we improve life outcomes for all involved, and create a culture of true disability inclusion.



Defining Friendship:

Across time, culture—and even species —a friend is a friend

What defines friendship?

In journalist Lydia Denworth's book *Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond*, she explores many aspects of friendship, and writes that as we try to understand just how biologically fundamental friendship is, "Comparative studies across species force you to strip behavior down to its simplest forms."

That's why, she writes, University of California researcher John Capitanio, who does work with non-human primates, defines it this way: *two individuals who hang out together happily, without conflict or aggression, more often than chance would predict.*

This is why Philly Friendship Circle's deceptively complex main rules—*Be Yourself, and Have Fun*—actually comport with research.

We have four different groups of clients and participants we serve: Children (neurotypical and atypical or special needs); teens (neurotypical and atypical or special needs); young adults (neurotypical—often our alumni—and atypical or special needs) and parents (primarily of children and teens and young adults with special needs).

The programming of Philly Friendship Circle has four goals:

- To engage youth with and without disabilities through fun, interactive experiences that will build their confidence and self-esteem they need for a productive adult life;
- To provide parents and families of these young people much-needed respite and support;
- To nurture a sense of awareness and responsibility in neurotypical teenagers; and
- To connect Friendship Circle families and teen volunteers to the greater community through educational and social programs.

Why is the simple intervention of friendship formation important? The physical and mental benefits of friendship have been widely studied by the medical and psychological community.

According to the American Psychological Association, "Psychological research from around the world shows that having social connections is one of the most reliable predictors of a long, healthy, and satisfying life. A review of 38 studies found that adult friendships, especially high-quality ones that provide social support and companionship, significantly predict well-being and can protect against mental health issues such as depression and anxiety—and those benefits persist across the life span.¹ People

with no friends or poor-quality friendships are twice as likely to die prematurely, according to Holt-Lunstad's meta-analysis of more than 308,000 people—a risk factor even greater than the effects of smoking 20 cigarettes per day.”²

Isolation and loneliness were on the rise well before the pandemic, and public health officials are paying more and more attention to the critical role that friendship can play. Healthy adult relationships often start when we are young—three to four is when we begin to form our first real friendships, and Philly Friendship Circle has begun to serve kids that are even younger than this threshold.

According to research by Jeffrey A. Hall at the University of Kansas, published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, the amount of time spent with another individual will determine the depth of that relationship. In addition, “When defining a friend, shared activities is one of the first qualities mentioned by children (La Gaipa, 1977) and adolescents (Parks, 2007) and is similarly valued in adult friendships (Hall, 2012).” Philly Friendship Circle's ongoing, year-long programming, while it can seem informal in nature, is exactly the kind of experience that facilitates friendship formation.

We believe that the simple act of facilitating friendships, particularly friendships between and among both typical and atypical kids and teens, changes life outcomes for all of our members.

Especially for those families affected by caring for youth with special needs, isolation can compound stressors, and our interventions are providing critical support that provides a foundation for positive life-outcomes among some of our most vulnerable populations.

¹ Pezirkianidis, C., et al., *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 14, 2023; Blieszner, R., et al., *Innovation in Aging*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2019.

² *PLOS Medicine*, Vol. 7, No. 7, 2010.

Rate at which people are likely to die prematurely if they don't have friends

At Risk Youth:

The particular challenges of forming friendships for youth with disabilities and neurodivergence

A large body of evidence shows that friendships are important not just to our psycho-social health, but to our physical health as well. In *Friendship*, Lydia Denworth writes, “For a long time, loneliness was mostly discussed by philosophers, who tended to celebrate it as a necessary step on the way to making great art or achieving true reflection.” But using the medical term “epidemic” to describe America’s loneliness problem is more appropriate than you might think. Having friends lowers our blood pressure and gives us a host of other benefits. As cited earlier in this paper, not having friends is, in terms of health statistics, as dangerous as smoking cigarettes.

Kids who exhibit neurodivergence, have physical disabilities, or experience other conditions that set them apart from their able-bodied, neurotypical peers, are particularly at risk when they don’t have friends. Studies show that loneliness and self-esteem issues in kids with neurodevelopmental disabilities is associated with “negative consequences on mental health, behaviour, and psychosocial/emotional development, with a likely long-term impact in adulthood.”³ Children and teens who participate in Philly Friendship Circle programs are therefore more likely to experience better outcomes immediately and throughout their lives than

those who remain in isolation as they develop into adults.

According to the Surgeon General’s report, “Although risk may differ across indicators of social disconnection, currently, studies find the highest prevalence for loneliness and isolation among people with poor physical or mental health, disabilities, financial insecurity, those who live alone, single parents, as well as younger and older populations.” This can become a whole-family problem, as the parents of children with special needs may also become isolated, which is why Philly Friendship Circle also has programs to support parents and caregivers. Over one in three parents of kids with intellectual developmental disabilities and kids with autism spectrum disorder meet the threshold for clinical depression; mothers are at particularly risk.

Where we sit in the social hierarchy—and our diversity of relationships—can even affect our immune system. As one researcher that Denworth interviewed put it,



“Quiet suffering may be how people experience loneliness, but at a molecular level it ranks right up there with poverty, trauma, bereavement, and all kinds of other much more vivid, dramatic stuff. ... Loneliness is one of the most effective ways we know to make a body feel threatened and insecure.”

The Surgeon General's report explains that, "The role of social connection on biology emerges early in life and continues across the life course, contributing to risk and protection from disease. Several reviews document that social connection can influence health through specific biological pathways, including cardiovascular and neuroendocrine dysregulation, immunity, and gut-microbiome interactions. Because regulation of these systems is critical for good health, the documented influence between social connection and these biological pathways likely explains the impact on the risk of the development of disease."

Friendship formation in youth is critical to development of all kinds, and Philly Friendship Circle works with children as young as three to begin providing them with opportunities to connect with their peers. Our work is part of the larger "Social Infrastructure" that the Surgeon General's report recommends as the first pillar to combating the loneliness epidemic. "Social infrastructure refers to the programs (such as volunteer organizations, sports groups, religious groups, and member associations), policies (like public transportation, housing, and education), and physical elements of a community (such as libraries, parks, green spaces, and playgrounds) that support the development of social connection."

Philly Friendship Circle has begun exploring raising the funds to invest in its own center, which would offer greater ease of access and enhanced security, and would in the long-term create a more community-wide nexus that centers on the idea of creating a

culture of disability inclusion. Currently, the organization rents space from multiple different locations throughout the year, and staff must transport and set up programming each time for, for instance, Sunday Circle.

Risks for Isolated Youth

- **Lack of out of school time activities**
- **Lack of opportunity to build psycho-social skills**
- **Lack of culturally appropriate spaces**

Can lead to:

- **Self-harm and Suicide**
- **Anxiety and Depression**
- **Lessened Cognitive Function**
- **Cardiovascular Disease**
- **Hypertension**
- **Diabetes**
- **Infectious Disease**

³ Citation for study: Brain Science, 2020. "Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Children with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities: A Scoping Review," by [Celia Kwan](#), [Mojgan Gitimoghaddam](#), and [Jean-Paul Collet](#).

The Solution:

Cultivating friendships—our twenty year journey

Philly Friendship Circle provides organized physical and social structures to support inclusive friendships, connections, respite, and fulfillment for children and teens of all abilities and their respective families, young adults of all abilities, and the Jewish community at large. While we are a culturally Jewish organization, we welcome friends from all different walks of life. Our programs are free and open to all.

Through fun and interactive experiences, these relationships bring a sense of joy and meaning to the Philly Friendship Circle community and beyond. Our approach is to engage youth with special needs who are not served elsewhere through a variety of interactive social programs. We include children with severe disabilities, older teens and young adults (who often are not accommodated in broad-based community programs) and introduce them to local teenagers who become their friends.

Through the friendships formed in these programs, the lives of all involved are enriched: parents receive respite; neurotypical teens learn the value of giving to others; and youth with special needs and those without special needs build relationships through our variety of programs.

These activities include organized group programs with camp-like activities such as art, music, movement, science, drama, and storytelling led by professional educators and artists who understand special needs and neurodivergent children; at-home friend visits for children with special-needs by neurotypical counterparts; education and support for parents with children with special-needs; leadership development activities to build a more inclusive culture for kids with special-needs and families; group meals and Sunday family walks; and field trips to museums and other cultural or nature destinations organized with disability inclusivity in mind.

The Component Parts of Social Connection

Structure

Household Size, Friend Circle Size,
Marital/Relationship Status

Function

Emotional Support, Mentorship, Support in a
Crisis

Quality

Relationship Satisfaction, Relationship Strain,
Social Inclusion/Exclusion

OUR PROGRAMS TO HELP FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTION

Sunday Circle:

A place for making friends

At each Sunday Circle, we spend the first hour (after staff set up) in the space with an orientation for our friends without disabilities to prepare them for the day. Then, during sign-in, and based on past experiences and what we know of each friend, we make pairs of friends who go through programming together. Programming consists of three stations that the friend pairs can rotate through. Activities always include our art studio, which is a favorite. The other two options rotate depending on the week, and may include music, including a drum circle, or storytelling; movement and physical play, from using sensory dough to participating in karate; and participating in cooking or science activities, all with a culturally appropriate lens.

At each Circle, we also provide space for parents to relax while their children with special needs and some siblings participate in programming. The entire experience lasts eight hours for the staff from set up to clean up; three hours for kids without disabilities; and two hours of programming for kids with disabilities.

Despite the challenge of not having a permanent space, Sunday Circle has been a welcoming environment for numerous new

families, including a robust preschool age group. Families are increasingly dropping off all their children, ensuring a comprehensive family experience. One parent shared: "As parents, we know every Sunday is safe, meaningful, successful, and feels like an ongoing holiday family dinner!"

Sunday Circle is our cornerstone program, consistently drawing nearly 60 members per session (FY 24-25).

Friendship 101:

Not just an orientation—a way of life

Our revamped orientation for teen members that precedes each Sunday Circle, "Friendship 101", now focuses on friendship skills, community contributions, wellness, and special needs/inclusion education. These topics always connect to a Jewish value of inclusion (Love your fellow as yourself; all Israel is responsible for one another; respect; created in the image of God; guarding one's language; peace at home; and not separating oneself/solidarity. While our staff developed the new curriculum, teen leaders were instrumental in helping to implement and host it, ensuring it resonated well with participants.

During Friendship 101, teens have the time to transition from the outside world to the world of Sunday Circle. There, we focus on being present and being able to uphold our two rules: be yourself and have fun with friends. Each session is a stand alone experience

that will encompass a Jewish value as well as an experience that helps teens to learn more about one of the above mentioned themes. Each session starts with a warm up as teens gather for a hands on project, such as beading, or a getting to know you prompt/game, and experience with sensory and everyday items.

There are also sessions led by teen leaders focused on building the Philly Friendship community as we prepare for the annual Walk and annual Gala, our large community events. There are sessions led by outside professionals introducing teens to various therapies like speech and occupational and how the techniques involved in that work can support their friendships at Sunday Circle. There are sessions about understanding one's own sensory needs and those of others as well as about new "discoveries" and techniques in the world of disability inclusion. For example, a panel of self-advocates sharing their experience with a communication tool known as SEEN (Spellers Empowering Education for Nonspeakers).

Young Adult Events:

Making a difficult transition easier, and fostering community

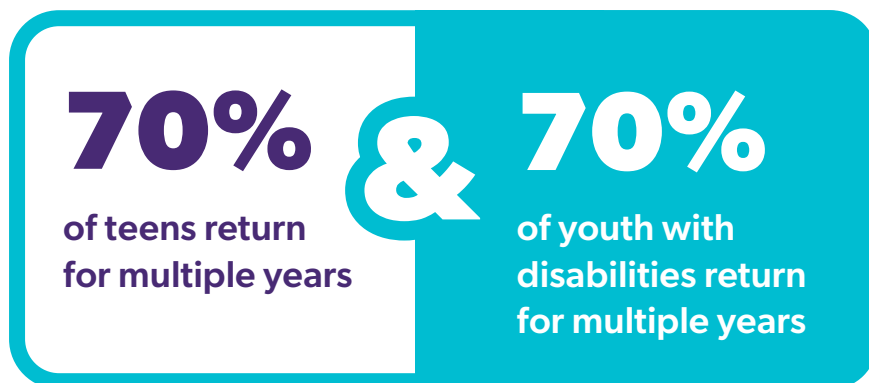
Our Young Adult program provides developmentally and socially appropriate activities for people of all abilities ages 18-40. These programs are especially important for members 18-30 as they transition from public school and home-based programming and residences to more communal and sometimes employment-based activities. These years are sometimes marked by moving from home to independent living or group homes, or, in some cases, larger residential communities. Staying connected to a community that a member may have known since they were a child or teen provides connection and belonging.

Virtual Programming:

Some young adults we see only virtually at our almost every Thursday beloved Young Adult Happy Hour, which happens 42-45 times a year. The weekly virtual happy hour, initiated during the COVID lockdown, has continued to be a strong social outlet.

In-Person Programming:

Our in-person events foster strong friendships and social skills among participants through approximately nine to 12 unique programs. These include community service, such as joining Beth Am Israel's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, Purim Package assembly and delivery (mishloach manot) and food packing at



Jewish Relief Agency (JRA). The other six programs are monthly activity and dining programs on Sunday evenings. We have art two to four times per program year and fitness two to four times per program year. The last dining event of the program year is at a restaurant. We also celebrate Jewish holidays together at a dinner in a Sukkah during the holiday of Sukkot in the Fall and a Friday evening Shabbat dinner in the winter. A spontaneous dance party at an Art & Dining Event highlighted the joy and connection these gatherings foster.

Friends at Home:

Meeting people where they are

During Friends at Home visits, a friend who has gone through an orientation and an initial Philly Friendship Circle supervised first hangout/playdate—and after which both parties have agreed to pursue the friendship—makes regular visits to a friend who has disabilities. Finding pairs that have potential for friendships that also match location and schedule availability is a logistical challenge, but the benefits are clear.

The friend with disabilities—and their family—also participate in an orientation prior to the initial hangout. Pairs meet weekly whenever possible, on average three times a month or 30 times per year, spending 30 hours per year together. Most friend pairs do not meet during the summer months. Their time might be spent talking, playing games, making arts and crafts, listening to or

playing music—the pair, with support from parents, can decide to do anything that they both find enjoyable.

Each program year, we work to plan at least one opportunity for teens and families who participate in Friends at Home to feel part of the larger community of Philly Friendship Circle. Some Friends at Home do not attend other programs, so do not always understand that they are part of a bigger, inclusive community. At these programs, we hope that members will connect and motivate one another through the shared experiences of the Friends at Home program.

In the past, to bring these pairs into the larger community, we've had an ice cream social, enjoyed a Flyers Game together, and will soon plan a Shabbat lunch.

Our Friends at Home program in FY24-25 expanded to 15 active pairs, with more interest growing.

**6 HOURS
PER YEAR**

Average friendship
formation time spent
for teens without
disabilities

Average
friendship
formation time
spent for teens
with disabilities

**4 HOURS
PER YEAR**

Evidence-Based vs. Evidence Informed Approaches:

Individual-centered interventions foster true inclusion

While two possible clinical approaches—evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions—both avail themselves of the body of knowledge available in the scientific literature, evidence-informed practices allow more flexibility to serve the needs of a particular child and family.

Particularly in a setting in which the conditions Philly Friendship Circle routinely experiences—including autism, physical and mental disabilities, developmental delays, and depression and anxiety—it's important that we nurture the right friendships pairs, and that our experienced staff have an understanding of each individual friend's needs to be able to provide the right activities, oversight, and support. (Please see more information on methodology below in the "Out of School Time Activities In Practice" section).

That flexibility and context ultimately allows us to create individual plans for each friendship pair. You can think of the evidence-informed intervention equation as "evidence-based + practitioner experience + the child's particular experience" which eliminates a "cookie cutter" or "cookbook" approach.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies defines it this way. "An evidence-informed approach to practice can be defined as the integration of research evidence alongside practitioner expertise and the people experiencing the practice (e.g. child and parent using a service or program). Blending knowledge from different sources is an inclusive and useful approach because knowledge is personal, context driven and evolving. This type of approach also allows for innovation and adaptation based on factors and context at individual, organisational and service levels, while reducing biases."

Philly Friendship Circle uses an evidence-informed approach. Importantly, that does not mean it is less rigorous—it means that it is more flexible, culturally responsive, and contextual.

On the limitations side, Philly Friendship Circle realizes that there are certain grant funds—particularly those at the state and federal levels—that will look at our more qualitative metrics with less good favor than quantitative metrics. As such, we would love to have dedicated funds that would allow us to better develop these kinds of metrics.

But in the interim, we feel strongly that being open to anyone who needs our services, regardless of diagnosis or financial need—and being able to craft individual plans for each of our members, is the more impactful way of serving our members.

Additionally, cultural context and competence for all types of

Jewish religious observance is central to our work. Importantly, while we are a culturally Jewish organization, we are not a religious organization, and our programming is open to all. (For those metrics that we do currently pursue, please see the last section of this paper.)

Our evidence-based practices (i.e., ensuring that enough time is spent with pairs to engender a deep friendship) is combined with

our evidence-informed practices, which include sensitivity to Jewish cultural practices, and individual-centered design that considers each child and family as the unique person and group that it is, allowing our Friendship Experts and the youth themselves to come to the best approach for each friendship pair.

Philly Friendship Circle’s Culturally Responsive Approach:
Comparison of Evidence-Based vs. Evidence-Informed Practices for Friendship Formation Between Youth with Disabilities and Their Peers

Evidence-Based Practices (More Clinical Settings)		Evidence-Informed Practices in the Field (Philly Friendship Circle)
DEFINITION	Rely on rigorously tested interventions validated through peer-reviewed research, often via randomized controlled trials (RCTs).	Draw on best available research, but also incorporate practitioner expertise and contextual realities, e.g., Friendship Experts who are practiced at the subtleties of interpersonal interaction.
APPROACH	Prioritize standardized methods proven effective across multiple contexts.	Tailor strategies to fit specific community, cultural, or individual needs.
EXAMPLES	Peer-mediated interventions; structured social skills groups; Circle of Friends model.	Sunday rather than Saturday programming, Kosher food, culturally relevant activities, and continual adjustment for the needs of each individual and friendship pair.
STRENGTHS	High replicability; strong empirical support; can demonstrate causal effects.	Flexible; responsive to unique dynamics; emphasizes relational and emotional context.

Philly Friendship Circle’s Culturally Responsive Approach (cont.)

Comparison of Evidence-Based vs. Evidence-Informed Practices for Friendship Formation Between Youth with Disabilities and Their Peers

	Evidence-Based Practices (More Clinical Settings)	Evidence-Informed Practices in the Field (Philly Friendship Circle)
LIMITATIONS	May overlook local or cultural context; can be rigid in application.	Less standardized; outcomes may be harder to measure or generalize. (Please see how we measure impact, page 23).
FOCUS	Fidelity to tested models and statistical outcomes.	Holistic integration of values like belonging, trust, and empathy. Philly Friendship Circle operates on the bedrock principle of “Love your fellow as yourself,” and we practice radical inclusion.
PRACTIONER ROLE	Implement predefined protocols with fidelity.	Collaborate, reflect, and adapt approaches based on lived experience.
EVALUATION METRICS	Quantitative: frequency of peer interactions, changes in social skills.	Mixed-methods: personal narratives, student reflections, observed relationship quality.
WHO LEADS	Researchers and intervention developers.	Educators, therapists, families, and youth co-creating approaches.
SUITABILITY FOR	Programs with capacity for training, assessment, and scalability.	Settings valuing innovation, cultural relevance, or person-centered design.

“Out of School Time” Activities in Practice: How it works in the field at Sunday Circle

Philly Friendship Circle’s lead Friendship Expert Dr. Cait Gilmartin, a special education supervisor in the Colonial School District and a nationally certified school psychologist with a board diplomate in school neuropsychology, reminds us that at Sunday Circle, where kids connect over structured activities that include arts and culture activities, physical activity, and other structured play (some in the field may refer to our work as “Out of School Time Activities”)—it’s also real life.

“I think it’s important to note that similar to everyone’s experiences, not all friendship pairs are successful—it’s not a random process. Making sure that we are fostering a ‘friend relationship’ and not just a ‘helping relationship’—where the non-disabled teen simply ‘assists’ their peer—helps us to nurture the right pairs,” says Gilmartin.

Mike Bouchier, another of our lead Friendship Experts, explains how it works:

“At Friendship Circle, we’re looking to foster an environment where inclusive friendships can grow. Part of that is thinking about the matchup process for a given Sunday Circle. Overall, we look at

interests, personality, age, comfortability, and—in the case of our neurotypical teens—willingness to assume some level of responsibility when we’re thinking about pairing two friends together. Sometimes we’ll match based on similarities; sometimes we’ll match based on differences. It all depends on what has been communicated to us by the child, their parents, or others. Based on what we observe as they participate in more Sunday Circles, we adjust.

“Some friends just need a little ‘nudge’ from an ‘outsider’ to help them see that they have a connection. For example, imagine two friends who are on the quiet side who are not actively engaging with each other; it might seem that they are not a good fit for one another—at first. But with the support of a Friendship Expert or Adult Volunteer, they discover they both love pottery and all things art-related! Now that they have something to engage in together, and there is common ground for the relationship to grow from there.

“There might also be a need for a friend who is much more outgoing to be matched up with a friend who is quiet, in order to help one friend come out of their ‘shell.’ This can be beneficial because a positive attitude can be ‘infectious.’ It can help the shy friend to engage not only with their friend, but with others as well. We’ve seen many successful matchups like this.

“Now, there are some friends that have specific needs or restrictions in terms of speech, mobility, processing, etc. For these

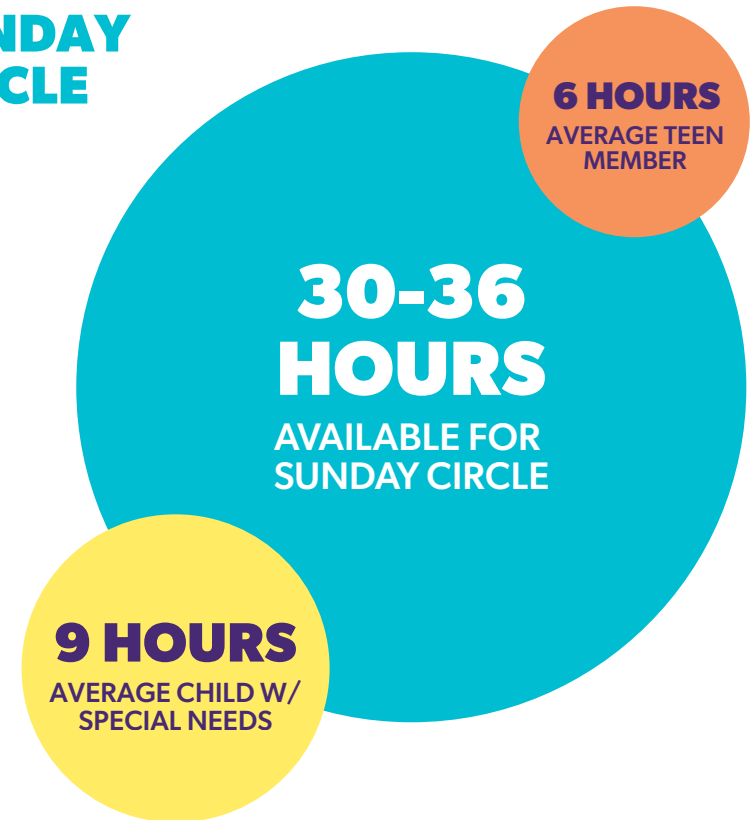
instances we're looking for a neurotypical teen that is warm, engaging, and also willing to take on a certain amount of responsibility. That's not to say they are effectively becoming their friend's 1:1, but rather they might help their friend by pushing their wheelchair around and helping them take an elevator; assisting with using a non-verbal communication device; notifying a Friendship Expert if their friend has a medical episode, i.e. seizure (very rare, but the possibility is there). It's important that the teen in this matchup be a friend who is: A. Warm & Engaging, B. Willing to have responsibility, and; C. Will not become overwhelmed or "depressed" by hanging out with their friend.

"Of course, not everything is the right fit, and not every matchup is a success. It can take a few times before a solid connection is found. That is why it is important to have an open, clear line of communication for all involved, and that at the end of the day the only thing that we genuinely expect from everyone is to try their best at being themselves and having fun."

The highly individualized nature of what Philly Friendship Circle is doing highlights the strong need for adequate numbers of Friendship Experts to facilitate matches, adjust, and ensure good outcomes for all of our Friends.

Hours Friends spend together—time together is one of the essential components of friendship formation.

SUNDAY CIRCLE



‘Outrageously Lucky’: The benefits of an inclusive culture for neurotypical youth without disabilities

Teen girls, in particular, are experiencing a social-media induced epidemic of skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression, leading to alarming rates of self-harm and suicide. These struggles underscore the vital importance of real, high-quality socialization.

According to statistics from the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia on the Jewish population in Philadelphia, “Forty percent of households reported having a member who has been diagnosed with a mental health, developmental, or behavioral health condition. The most common were a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety (33%) and a learning or developmental disability (17%) such as ADHD, dyslexia, or an Autism spectrum disorder. Just 2 percent reported a household member with an opioid addiction.”

These are not just statistics—these are the families we serve.

It’s important to note that these statistics were amassed *before* the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, and before the resultant rise in antisemitism, including the attack on Pennsylvania’s Governor Josh Shapiro, the murder of two young people outside an event at the Jewish Museum in our nation’s capital, and before protesters calling for the return of Israeli hostages were fire-bombed in Colorado.

Our programs, more than ever, bring the community together to create a safe place of welcome and celebration that is inclusive of those with special needs, with Jewish cultural identity, and those neurotypical teens who may still have challenges of their own.

The Surgeon General’s report is clear that serving others, even when a teen already has a high social connection, provides a benefit to them. “Interestingly, there is also evidence showing that the well-being benefits associated with volunteering are even greater for those with higher social connectedness than those with less,” says the report. “Because these cycles can be reinforcing, prioritizing social connection can not only disrupt vicious cycles but also reinforce virtuous ones.”



Philly Friendship Circle routinely experiences the same situation: A teen who may have initially joined to “help” their disabled peer actually comes to the realization—organically and authentically—that they, too, are being transformed by the experience.

Giving time and attention to others, especially when we are feeling anxiety or depression ourselves, improves mental and physical health outcomes. Engaging with individuals who are radically different from them teaches neurotypical teens deep acceptance, sensitivity, and responsibility. Finding common ground through shared joy forces them to approach the world with curiosity instead of competitiveness or judgment—skills that

both the teens and society desperately need.

"Be Yourself and Have Fun" is a profound "medicine" for typical teenagers. Unlike modern digital interactions ("hiding in plain sight" on phones) or rigid therapy sessions, PFC fosters relationships that are non-transactional, non-performative, and free of intense structure or judgment. It gives teens the rare and healthy space to just "be."

Our growing alumni network fans out into their own spheres of influence—including their own families—to bring these values with them.

One parent told the crowd at a Philly Friendship Circle event, "Many people, when they first encounter Philly Friendship Circle, think that this is a 'special needs organization.' However, no one in our family has special needs, and we weren't connected to the special needs community before Friendship Circle. ... I am here because of the impact Friendship Circle has had on me, my family, and I'm sure so many of you in this room. I wish I had the time tonight to tell you everything I've seen since our journey with Friendship Circle began sixteen years ago. ... All our family has been transformed through our relationship with Friendship Circle. We watched as Jesse, Aaron, and Ben went from cautiously approaching an unfamiliar community to becoming enthusiastic, caring, comfortable, and confident members of it. It is no coincidence that even though our children have graduated high school and two from college, they have continued to cultivate their connection to Friendship Circle."

Then, her son Jesse spoke. "There are a million reasons I'm up here tonight speaking to you all. ... Zev and Chani and their wonderful family have become my friends; so has Josh, who I met through Friends at Home and remains one of my oldest friends; the countless friends with and without disabilities and their families that I've met since 2008 are my friends; and really, I count as a friend anyone who rallies around the mission of Friendship Circle—anyone who can see how special this is.

"But it's not just about us as individuals; it's about our chosen, shared mission of Friendship Circle that unites us. I got involved as a 'bar mitzvah project'—a little nervous, and unsure of what to expect. It turns out that the only way to answer those questions was to try. That meant a Sunday Circle with Steven, going down the slides at Beth El or with someone my age who needed the physical support of a friend, and many more Sunday Circles playing with friends of all different abilities; it meant a lot of evenings of Friends at Home playing catch with Josh in the backyard...



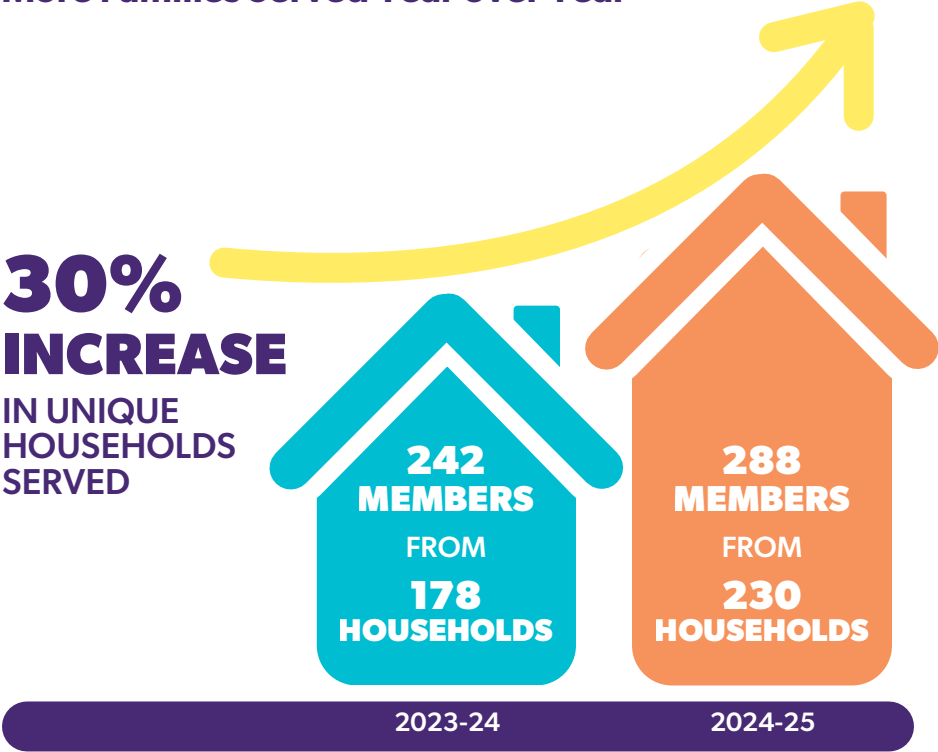
"I feel outrageously lucky for the friendships I made, and continue to make, here..."

When I consider how the experiences I just shared with you have changed and continue to change my life, this is what I see: I want Friendship Circle to be around for my own children."

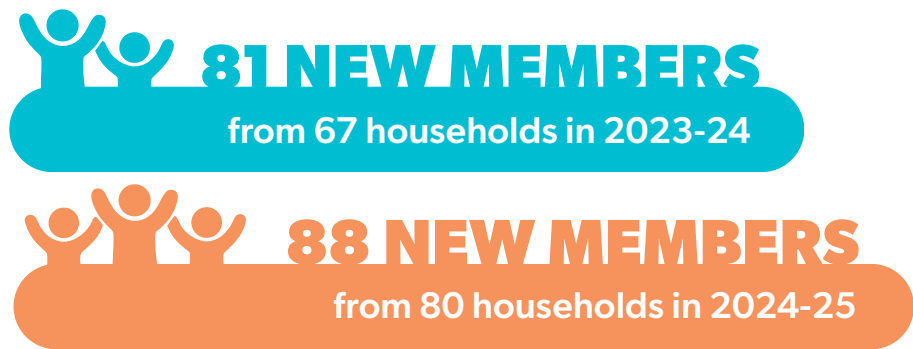
Over the long-term these experiences also trend toward more and more youth understanding what true inclusion looks like.

PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT IS GROWING

More Families Served Year over Year

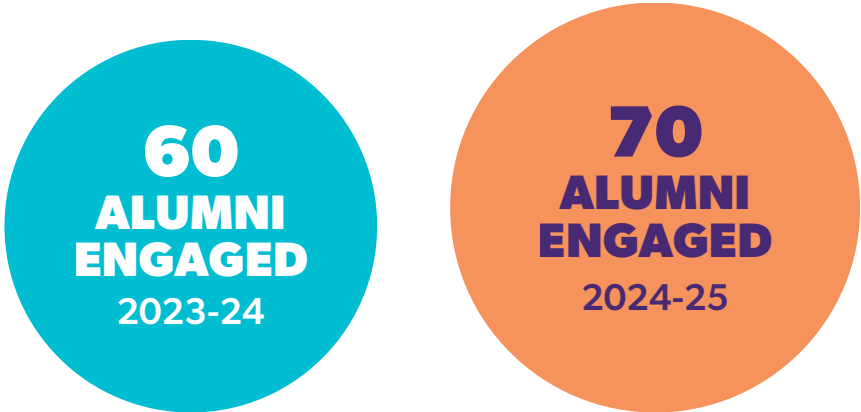


More Friends Involved Year over Year

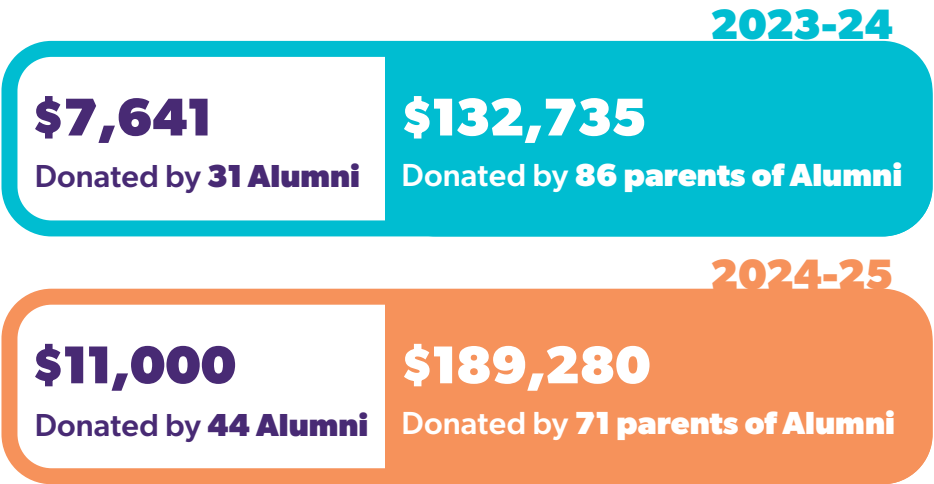


A Growing and Increasingly Engaged Alumni Network

We currently have 582 alumni, and are in touch with nearly half of them. We consider an alum “engaged” if in any given year they attended a program, staff had one-on-one contact with them, or if they donated to the organization.



Alumni Giving



Important Support for Parents

It's hard to be a parent—those challenges are multiplied when your child has a disability, but all parents need support and respite, and Philly Friendship Circle is there for them. Overall parent engagement includes taking advantage of the Parent Room at Sunday Circle, Moms Night Out, Dads Night Out, Field Trips, and participation in Community Events.

Support and Respite



118 PARENTS

served on average in 2023-24 and 2024-25

Special Trips and Family Time

Family trips are to places such as the Please Touch Museum, the Weitzman Museum of American Jewish History, the Philadelphia Zoo and activities such as bowling.

95 INDIVIDUALS

from 67 households on average each year



Creating a Culture of True Inclusion: A Conversation with Philly Friendship Circle's Founders

At Philly Friendship Circle, inclusion goes far beyond simply inviting someone into a space. As our co-founder Zev Baram explains, true inclusion is fundamentally about creating "a sense of belonging"—where every individual feels at ease, and where that feeling "can be done immediately, and quickly. Everybody gets that sense of anybody's celebrated here. It's my place too."

"Chabad Chasidic philosophy is who we are and what's guiding us and what our structure is," says Zev. Many different kinds of Jewish families—as well as families who are not Jewish—use Philly Friendship Circle's free services. Many different factors play a role.

Our approach to inclusion is built on several core philosophical principles that distinguish us from other organizations in the disability services space. Part of that philosophy is acknowledging the power and sacredness of the individual, and another is the power of being together.

The sacredness of the individual

Co-founder Chani Baram articulates the first part of our

foundational beliefs this way: "Each person is unique and important, and you have something unique to contribute, a special light that the world needs that's only yours to shine... There's no snowflake that's the same, there's no fingerprint that's the same. There's no person that's the same. And we believe that there's a soul inside of every person, and that when you were put onto this earth, it was the universe and God saying, *we need you here. There's a purpose for you being here, and nobody else can do what you can do.*"

This recognition of individual worth applies to "every teen, every parent, every child with special needs, every sibling, every staff member—everybody," says Chani. We want everyone to understand, she says, "that you have a special light, and you're irreplaceable. And we hope that in this environment you can find the best version of yourself."

Our inclusion model prioritizes understanding individuals over standardized approaches. As Chani explains, "There's no shortcuts to understanding individual needs, and what's going to make you feel comfortable. We have to be careful to not put our own assumptions on people. You have to ask somebody what they need and want."

Understanding individual experiences and needs applies to youth with and without disabilities, and being honest about the fact that differences can mean distance—at first.

True inclusion requires helping people move beyond societal conditioning that creates barriers to authentic connection. Zev explains one of the core challenges: "I think it's an 'us and them' sort of thing... *there, but for the grace of God, go I...* we're naturally wired to put up boundaries when someone is different than us—we have our implicit biases."

The urge to look away or stare, he says, is natural, and our conditioning often manifests as pity—disgust even—rather than acknowledgment that we are in the presence of another human being. As teens are given their orientation to becoming friends at Philly Friendship Circle, the goal is to acknowledge these forces and natural reactions, and then to move beyond them over time. "Helping people get comfortable with 'the other' is what we're trying to do" says Zev. The more authentic connection that happens, the more the relationship becomes an actual friendship.

As Chani notes, our conditioning sometimes puts up barriers that don't need to be there. This "muck" comes from multiple sources, she says, and needs to be peeled away. Some of it is individual psychological backgrounds and peer-induced understandings about disability. There is also societal messaging that positions relationships as "helper" and "helped" rather than as a relationship with give and take. There may also be a lack of authentic exposure to people with disabilities in natural settings, or family experiences with exclusion and disappointment that create protective barriers.

On the last item, she says, "There's also muck that the parents and

family members and individuals with special needs themselves bring about their experience, and how they see themselves," Chani says. Parents will often say, "Well, you're not gonna be able to handle my kid... my kid can't do x, y, z."

But often, they find that they have been welcomed authentically for the very first time, and that sense of belonging opens up the world: the child actually can do x, y, or z. That's that power of being together—the second big part of the philosophy that drives Philly Friendship Circle's work.

One parent shared, "Now, when people look at us differently because my child has a disability, I don't feel bad about myself. I feel bad that those parents don't realize the possibility and reality of a community like PFC that actually accepts us."

The power of being together

"We find inherent beauty in our being together," says Chani. "We all need each other—we are puzzle pieces that fit together in ways that create something greater than the sum of our parts. Drawing from Chasidic philosophy, this concept is expressed in Hebrew as *mashpia* and *mekabel*—the giver and the receiver. Each of us embodies both aspects in different ways and at different times. We are all givers, and we are all receivers, and through this dynamic exchange, we create authentic relationships—and we make friends and are a gift that brings joy to one another."

As the light generated from togetherness grows, it creates a broader culture of inclusion. Friends fan out into our broader society, bringing with them the experience they've had at Philly Friendship Circle into their lives and domains and other relationships.

As the puzzle pieces start fitting together, the friends really can just abide by the only rules that Philly Friendship Circle has: Be yourself and have fun.

Small interactions can make a big difference, Chani says.

"A little bit of light dispels a lot of darkness—a little flicker of light can change the whole room. One moment of kindness can change the whole world."



Our Metrics:

Community Participation in the Annual Philly Friendship Circle Walk, Gala, and Art Show

Twice per year, we bring the entire Philly Friendship Circle community together. At the fall's annual walk, we strive to make our friends and family visible to the larger region as we celebrate and walk together. In the spring, our Annual Gala and fundraiser is a chance to come together, recommit to our organizational values, and celebrate all of the individuals within our growing community.



PHILLY FRIENDSHIP WALK

50 Business Supporters

500 Attendees

668 Donors



ANNUAL GALA

350 Attendees

406 Donors

5 Business Supporters



ANNUAL ART SHOW

127 Attendees

150 Member Artists

1 Foundation - Bear Givers



How We Measure Financial and Core Program Success

Financial Data

We evaluate our giving patterns extensively and part of how we measure success is looking at the number of returning annual gifts, increased gifts, and new givers. We are also beginning to apply for more grants to add to our robust individual giving program.

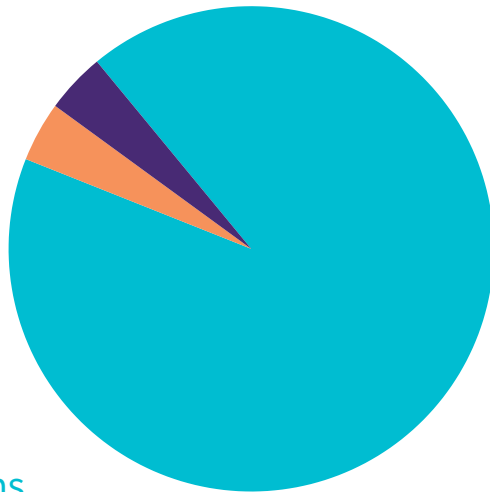
\$950,000

AVERAGE ANNUAL BUDGET

4%
Grants

4%
In-kind &
Corporate
Sponsorship

92%
Individual Donations
& Family Foundations



50% of families who use our services are also donors.

Our Methodology:

Collection Mechanisms for Program Metrics

Our program evaluation is connected to our evidence-informed practices. We use many different methods for collecting program data and metrics, and evaluating ourselves against the rubrics we've developed.

How People Participate and Engage Over Time

Philly Friendship Circle is a community available to members in whatever way it works for them at any given time, in keeping with our evidence-informed work that centers individual needs and context. For some, Philly Friendship Circle is a consistent presence in their lives; for others, they come in and out over a year, or over multiple years, as it works for them over time—and we encourage them to feel free to come back at any time.

Example: Youth with Special Needs

A child with special needs may attend Sunday Circle or Friends at Home for several years, and then take a break; they return to Young Adult programs in their 20s. While the child takes a break from attending programs, their parents may attend Moms or Dads Night Out programming. Sometimes a child moves to a residence and has limited or no involvement with Philly Friendship Circle but their parents continue to engage at Parents Nights Out or as

donors. There are other children with special needs who may begin as a school age child and remain attending Philly Friendship Circle Children & Youth programs through age 18, and then transition to our Young Adult programs that serve those 18-40. (The YA division is relatively new so we are not yet able to share a longitudinal perspective.)

Example: Youth without Special Needs

We may see a 6th or 7th grader participate in MVP and continue their involvement through high school, while, in the meantime, the parents get involved as volunteers and/or donors. In other cases, the child may do MVP and then return during high school. A teen who started as an MVP (or between 8th-12th grade) might remain connected to Philly FC after graduating high school by attending alumni events or as a donor or both. Some of their parents remain involved as donors and adult volunteers



Feedback & Data Collection

Immediate Self-Reports

We collect written feedback forms from participants, adult volunteers, and per-diem staff, such as Friendship Experts and Sunday Circle Facilitators, at the time programming takes place, i.e., feedback on ongoing programs such as Sunday Circle help us to improve the next Sunday session.

Immediate and Ongoing Staff Evaluation

The full-time staff evaluate the programs quantitatively, i.e., how many people did we serve and serve well?, and qualitatively, i.e., what additional programmatic elements might we add to enrich our programming? This happens after individual programs as well as after a series of programs, such as a three-program session of Sunday Circles.

End-of-Year Surveys

Program participants—including teens, young adults, and parents—complete written end-of-year surveys. When possible we also have focus group conversations with various constituent groups.

Comprehensive Yearly Evaluation

Both the program feedback surveys and end of year surveys serve as a foundation for our summer retreat meetings, when we review and evaluate the previous year in order to better plan for the upcoming program year. In addition to evaluating responses, we

evaluate the survey tools themselves to ensure that we're getting high-quality, consistent feedback. Over the years we have used a variety of methods to collect information about our members' experiences at programs. These methods have included post-program long surveys, post-program short surveys, post program individual phone calls, and post program individual emails.

Historically we received overwhelmingly positive feedback on our post-program survey both in general terms and in the specificity of members indicating that they are able to be themselves and have fun at programs.



Ongoing Improvements in our Data Collection

Currently, with improved data collection with the use of a formal database (CRM), we are able to focus on attendance records, using the fact that a high percentage of our members attend three or more programs each year, an indicator of success.

We are in a multi-year process of defining the terms of success for our largest ongoing program, Sunday Circle. In the near terms we will measure the number of members who attend at least 50% of Sunday Circles in a given program year. For those who attend less, we consider it a success if they or a member of their family attends another Philly Friendship Circle program during the year. In the future we will work to measure engagement and belongingness first for our members with special needs, then our parents and then our teens, thus, evaluating the experiences of all constituent member groups.

Appendix I - Citations and Suggested Future Reading

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

Annotation: A landmark federal report framing loneliness and isolation as a public health crisis, with recommendations for rebuilding social connection.

Alla, Kristel; Joss, Nerida. *What is an evidence-informed approach to practice and why is it important?* Australian Institute of Family Studies. 2021.

Annotation: A short article on the difference between evidence-informed and evidence-based practices.

Holt-Lunstad, Julianne; Smith, Timothy B.; Layton, J. Bradley. "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review." *PLOS Medicine*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2010, e1000316.

Annotation: A widely cited study showing that strong social relationships are linked to a significant reduction in mortality risk.

Pezirkianidis, Christos, et al. "Adult Friendship and Wellbeing: A Systematic Review." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14, 2023.

Annotation: A systematic review of how adult friendships contribute to well-being across contexts.

Blieszner, Rosemary, et al. "Friendship in Later Life: A Research Agenda." *Innovation in Aging*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2019, igz005.

Annotation: An agenda-setting article calling for more research on friendship in later life and its implications for aging populations.

Kumah, Enoch A., et al. "Evidence-informed Practice Versus Evidence-based Practice Educational Interventions for Improving Knowledge, Attitudes, Understanding, and Behavior Toward the Application of Evidence Into Practice: A Comprehensive Systematic Review." *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2019.

Annotation: A systematic review comparing "evidence-informed" vs. "evidence-based" education for undergraduates, clarifying how each impacts practice and understanding.

Denworth, Lydia. *Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Annotation: A science journalist's exploration of the biology and importance of friendship across the lifespan.

Christakis, Nicholas A. *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*. Little, Brown Spark, 2019.

Annotation: A Yale sociologist's book arguing that humans are evolutionarily predisposed to build good societies.

Kaplan, Seth D. *Fragile Neighborhoods: Repairing American Society, One Zip Code at a Time*. Little, Brown Spark, 2023.

Annotation: A practitioner's account of strengthening American communities by focusing on neighborhood-level renewal.

Sollish, Ari. *Inclusion and the Power of the Individual: In the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe*. Ezra Press, 2019.

Annotation: A work of Jewish thought on inclusion and individual agency in the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

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