

DESCRIPTIONS OF FRIENDSHIP FROM PREADOLESCENT BOYS  
WHO CARRY A LABEL ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation provides an account of the ways seven preadolescent boys with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship. This study extends previous research by providing more in-depth descriptions of friendship gleaned through iterative interviews. In addition to multiple interviews with each of the boys, I collected interview data from their parents, and one teacher of each boy. In order to convey friendship from the boys' perspectives, I present data across three broad themes: (1) Establishing and maintaining friendships, (2) Social reciprocity, and (3) Conflicts. The findings indicate that some important components of close friendships, (i.e., frequent and varied interactions, relative equality and reciprocity, maintenance over an extended period of time, and emotional support), that are commonly included in descriptions of preadolescent relationships in the general literature were evident in the close friendships of these boys with autism spectrum disorders.

Not only does this study help increase the understanding of the construct of friendship, but of autism spectrum disorders as well. Specifically, my findings challenge the deficit perspective of autism spectrum disorders in several ways: (1) these preadolescents described ways that they socialize with friends rather than ways to avoid social situations in favor of isolation (Kanner, 1943); (2) the majority described same-age friendships as opposed to failing to develop peer relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2000); and (3) four boys either are developing or have developed social

reciprocity with friends, instead of demonstrating a lack of social reciprocity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Researchers are just beginning to understand how preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders describe friendships. This study provides an important addition to the extant literature by providing insight into how a small group of highly verbal, preadolescent boys labeled with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship. Further research is necessary and will add to the sparse body of literature that just begins to depict how people with autism spectrum disorders understand and experience friendship.

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I am extremely fortunate that my outside editor, Judith Clarke, is also my mom and my friend. She has read almost every draft of every section of this dissertation. She has found missing commas, corrected the placement of adverbs, reworded poorly written sentences, and supported me every step of the way. I could not have completed this dissertation without you, Mom; you can put away your red pencils for now.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION

Theologian and writer, C.S. Lewis said, “Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art...It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival” (Lewis, 1960, p. 84). With insight that belies his age, Will, a 13-year-old boy with a label on the autism spectrum, said to me, “[Friendship] gives you something to do in your spare time. Actually it gives you something to make time into. No, [friendship] gives you something to make into actual time. Spare time is when they cancel on you” (Will\*, Interview). The purpose of this chapter is to prepare the reader for the remainder of the dissertation and to present the philosophical and research basis on which I build this dissertation.

There has been an upsurge of interest in and research on autism spectrum disorders. PubMed references related to autism spectrum disorders rose from 191 in 1995 to 665 in 2005. Professional journals from many disciplines (e.g., education, psychology, and sociology) as well as the popular media (e.g., NBC Nightly News) report on the clinical symptoms of autism spectrum disorders and interventions intended to alleviate those symptoms. Increasingly, people with autism spectrum disorders are writing autobiographies that provide first hand accounts of living with the condition (e.g., Barron & Barron, 2002; Grandin, 1995; Grandin & Scariano, 1986; L. Jackson, 2002; McKean, 1994; Willey, 1999; D. Williams, 1992, 1994). Fictitious representations such as the movie “Rainman” and the bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-*

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\* All names of participants and their locations have been changed to protect confidentiality.

*Time* (Haddon, 2003) also raise awareness of autism spectrum disorders and contribute to understanding how they are constructed as disabilities.

### Research Paradigm

I have situated my research in the social constructivist paradigm. A social model of disability acknowledges that impairments such as those on the autism spectrum exist in the world, but how these impairments are classified, treated, and interpreted is socially constructed (Benjamin, 2002; Donoghue, 2003; Harris, 1995; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Lawson, 2001; Molloy & Vasil, 2002; Oliver, 1992; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997; Siminski, 2003; Timimi & Taylor, 2004; Varenne & Naddeo, 1999; Wandrei, 2003; C. C. Williams & Collins, 2002). An inclusive community accepts and even values differences, but it also provides accommodations and modifications to help individuals manage the world in which they find themselves. An everyday example is curb cuts at street corners that make it easier for people who use wheelchairs to navigate sidewalks safely. Less obvious to the majority is that some people with autism spectrum disorders use computer-based voice output communication aid (VOCA) so that they can communicate.

The social constructivist paradigm positions “disability” in the environment rather than in the individual. If a person with an autism spectrum disorder uses a VOCA, he or she may feel enabled, rather than disabled. However, if access to such a device is restricted, or if others do not respond to a person who communicates with the assistance of a VOCA, then that person is being disabled.

It is informative to recognize the generalized characteristics of autism spectrum disorders. This may lead families to greater understanding of their children, to resources to explain their uniqueness, and to ways to offer supportive instruction; however, the

general characteristics of autism spectrum disorders do not help us to know the individual. Research on autism spectrum disorders situated in the social constructivist paradigm focuses on the perspectives and experiences of people with the neurological impairment, and aims to understand the meanings they create in their lives.

Baron-Cohen (2000) proposes that highly verbal people with autism spectrum disorders might not have an impairment but instead, he says, “They are different in ways that can be described in value-free terms” (p. 490). He synthesizes several research studies into twelve descriptive examples that are often seen in children with Asperger syndrome or “high-functioning” autism (AS/HFA) and he found that most studies portrayed “[the] child as immersed in the world of things rather than people” (Baron-Cohen, 2000, p. 490). From this synthesis Baron-Cohen deduces that,

Being more object-focused than people-focused is clearly only a disability in an environment that expects everyone to be social. But a moment’s reflection highlights the injustice of this expectation. Thus, people who show the opposite pattern (of being more people-focused than object-focused) are not necessarily considered disabled. On this view, people with AS/HFA would cease to be disabled as soon as society’s expectations change. For example, a child with AS/HFA who prefers to stay in the classroom poring over encyclopaedias and rock collections during break-time, when other children are outside playing together, could simply be seen as different, not disabled. It is not clear why the child with AS/HFA is seen as doing something less valuable than the other children or why their behaviour should be seen as an index of impairment. (p. 490)

In other words, Asperger syndrome and “high-functioning” autism are characterized as disorders because there is a perception that people with these labels do not behave “normally” in social situations. If the ways all people socialize are respected as part of the norm, then we lose the impetus to classify some as having a social disability.

### Research Questions

The goal of my research is to provide an account of how preadolescent boys with autism spectrum describe friendship. In a review of the literature I found just eight studies that addressed the personal perspectives of friendship held by individuals with autism spectrum disorders or by their mothers (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington, Templeton, & Papinczak, 2003; Church, Alinsanski, & Amanullah, 2000; Marks, Schrader, Longaker, & Levine, 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). These studies, included for thorough review in Chapter 2, did not provide in-depth insight into how their participants understand friendship. Even Carrington et al. (2003), whose explicit purpose was to examine “the perceptions of friendship for a group of secondary school students who have Asperger syndrome” (p. 212), focused instead on their participants’ deficits and confirmation of the characteristics of Asperger syndrome (see Chapter 2). Though I did not find this to be a strong study, it did provide me with a basic framework and interview questions that I improved upon for my research.

The following two questions guided my investigation: (1) What are the perceptions of friendship for a group of preadolescent males who carry a diagnosis on the autism spectrum? (2) How do they describe friends and friendship? Chapters 3 and 4 incorporate the participants’ voices in order to contribute to others’ appreciation of how

these boys, who experience a difference that “is at once neurological and social” (Ochs, Kremer-sadlik, Sirota, & Solomon, 2004, p. 171), describe friendship.

### Research Methodology

Molloy and Vasil (2002) are concerned, and rightly so, that “the voices of those who have been labeled are rarely incorporated into the accepted body of knowledge” (p. 667), that is, the empirical research on autism spectrum disorders. The intention of qualitative research is to “capture life as it is lived” (Boeree, 1998), as opposed to quantitative research in which variables are manipulated and controlled. Qualitative researchers actively avoid control, instead they seek unique contributions from their participants and learn about a particular phenomenon as it is revealed through their participants’ experiences with it (Boeree, 1998; Stoller, 1989).

Interpretive phenomenology is an appropriate method to use when the research question asks for meanings of a phenomenon in order to understand the human experience within the context of everyday life (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Richardson, Rogers, & McCarroll, 1998; Seamon, 2000; Smith, 1996). Anything that a person experiences (e.g., art, finances, religion) is appropriate for phenomenological investigation (Seamon, 2000). Thus friendship is a phenomenon because people experience or encounter it. The understanding sought through interpretive phenomenology involves a “process whereby one tries to approximate the perspective of others” (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992b, p. 6). A study employing interpretive phenomenology will enrich the literatures related to friendship and autism spectrum disorders, both of which have been examined quantitatively for the most part (e.g., Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001; Barnhill, Cook, Tebbenkamp, &

Myles, 2002; Berndt, 1982; Berndt & Hoyle, 1985; Buhrmester, 1990; Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000; Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Franco & Levitt, 1998; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Klin, 2000; Koning & Magill-Evans, 2001; Marriage, Gordon, & Brand, 1995; Myles, 2003; Solomon, Goodlin-Jones, & Anders, 2004; Szatmari, Bryson, Boyle, Streiner, & Duku, 2003).

Interpretive phenomenological researchers, like social constructivists, espouse that people and their social contexts are linked inextricably. They try to understand the social world as it is lived and to describe meanings from the individual's perspective. Informants reveal their meanings through interviews and observations (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Richardson & Fowers, 1998; Seamon, 2000; Smith, 1996) and, rather than numbers, the data take the form of narrative description (Merriam, 1988). The intent of this type of research is to use the important foundation these descriptions provide to uncover commonalities that represent the heart of the phenomenon, and not simply to share individual accounts (Seamon, 2000). In this way interpretive research contributes to theory-building and extension since specific descriptions help researchers gain a more general understanding of the essential nature of the phenomenon for human beings (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004; Seamon, 2000; Smith, 1996).

Having said that, the seven boys who participated in my research are not representative of all boys with autism spectrum disorders. I chose sections of conversations with Frank, Jack, Jimmy, Will, Grant, Matt, and Carl to include in Chapter 3. It was my intention to preserve the voices of the participants, not overshadow them with my opinions. For each preadolescent there were many conversations I could have shared. This is where I, as a researcher, had to make difficult choices about what should

be included in this dissertation and what would be set aside.

In the manuscripts that comprise the majority of this dissertation I have endeavored to ensure that my research methods—data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing process—are visible. I leave it to the reader to determine whether my interpretations resonate with their experiences of friendship and appear credible thereby enhancing their understanding of the phenomena of friendship and autism spectrum disorders.

### *Preconceptions Regarding Autism Spectrum Disorders*

Interpretive phenomenology does not require investigators to bracket their own preconceptions or theories during research (Johnson, 2000; Lowes & Prowse, 2001). However, it is advisable to acknowledge any assumptions that could influence the interview process or analysis and interpretation (Crist & Tanner, 2003). With that in mind, I did hold assumptions regarding friendships amongst people with autism spectrum disorders: (1) people who carry this label may have only one or two, if any, friends and (2) if they do have friends they may be significantly older or younger than themselves, although I did allow that they might have friends of their same age.

Though I situated this research in the social constructivist paradigm, much of my education was grounded in the medical model of disability (i.e., the positivist paradigm), which provides the commonly understood definition of autism spectrum disorders. It is important for me as a researcher and a reader to understand the prevailing discourse surrounding autism therefore in this section I present this model of autism spectrum disorders. In the United States the educational label and medical diagnoses of autism spectrum disorders are derived from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition-Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* and are found under pervasive

developmental disorders. Pervasive developmental disorders are characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication as well as the presence of repetitive behaviors and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

There is disagreement regarding a differential diagnosis for Asperger syndrome and “high-functioning” autism (Szatmari, Archer, Fisman, Streiner, & Wilson, 1995; Volkmar, Klin, & Pauls, 1998; Volkmar et al., 1996). Asperger syndrome is the name for a set of neurobiological symptoms first described in 1944 in a paper by Viennese physician, Hans Asperger. Asperger’s article described a pattern of behaviors in a small group of boys who had normal intelligence and language development, but who also exhibited marked difficulties in social and communication skills (Frith, 1991). However, this paper did not reach a wide English-speaking audience until Lorna Wing published “Asperger syndrome: A clinical account” in 1981. Wing’s pivotal article brought Asperger syndrome to the attention of researchers and in 1994, 50 years after it was initially described, Asperger syndrome was added to the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV Edition* as one of the pervasive developmental disorders.

“High-functioning” autism is not included in the *DSM-IV-TR* under pervasive developmental disorders; however, it is a widely used term (Frith, 2004). “High-functioning” is used when people are diagnosed with autism, but have an IQ within the normal range. Typically, children who are referred to as having “high-functioning” autism did not develop speech prior to age three, but do develop good verbal communication during childhood. Those labeled with Asperger syndrome also have an IQ within the normal range, and often above normal, but their verbal communication



does develop by age three (Eisenmajer et al., 1996; Frith, 2004; Hill & Frith, 2003; Mayes, Calhoun, & Crites, 2001; Miller & Ozonoff, 2000; Szatmari et al., 2000; Volkmar, Lord, Bailey, Schultz, & Klin, 2004).

In the literature Asperger syndrome and “high-functioning” autism are used somewhat interchangeably. I use Asperger syndrome when I refer to boys who have very good verbal skills and a diagnosis on the autism spectrum; however, some parents of participants in my study knew of the differentiation regarding when good verbal speech was acquired and therefore they use “high-functioning” autism to describe their sons. I have elected to refer to all my participants as having autism spectrum disorders to avoid use of the phrase “Asperger syndrome or ‘high-functioning’ autism,” since the abbreviation AS/HFA is discouraged by the journals to which I would like to submit my manuscripts.

#### Significance of this Research

This investigation contributes to the body of research on autism spectrum disorders by incorporating the voices of seven boys who live with this neurological difference. The study follows a line of investigation to extend the work of others (Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004) to interpret how seven preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship. The intent of my research is to inform educational practice in order to help others understand differences and perhaps to extend the definition of “typical” friendship amongst preadolescents. The results of this study may inform families and teachers who live and work with other boys. Increased understanding about the diverse ways people who carry a label on the autism spectrum

describe friendship may contribute to others' appreciation of the diverse social skills involved in friendship.

I entered the study hoping that it might empower the boys, though this was not a primary objective. Historically, people with autism spectrum disorders have been devalued and given limited say in what was done to and for them by more powerful members of society. Simply telling one's story can be empowering, as can having other people hear or read the stories (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992a). The mothers of the three youngest boys (Frank, Jack, and Jimmy) said that the boys were helped by their participation in the study. I do not know if these mothers were being polite, if I had an impact, or if talking about friendship indeed helped these boys as they matured. However, Frank's and Jack's mothers both wished I would continue to meet with their sons, and Jimmy and his mother said that he began to advocate for himself at school (regarding ongoing bullying) the week following our first interview. Finally, if this dissertation serves no other purpose, I hope it will provide a deeper understanding of the lives of preadolescent boys with autism spectrum disorders, not as boys with deficits, but simply as boys.

#### Organization of the Dissertation

In addition to this introductory chapter my dissertation includes two manuscripts that I plan to submit for publication. Since the following chapters are written as separate manuscripts some information is redundant (e.g., the framed literature review for the manuscript in Chapter 3 shares information presented in the literature review manuscript in Chapter 2). I have not included the individual reference lists for each manuscript. Instead all references are combined in one section of the dissertation. Likewise, following

the comprehensive list of references, the reader will find appendices, only two of which are referenced in Chapter 3 (i.e., the interview questions for preadolescents and adults). Appropriate references and appendices will be incorporated into each manuscript when preparing for submission to selected journals. Finally, tables are included in the body of the dissertation for the convenience of my readers.

I will submit Chapter 2, which provides background to this study and reviews the relevant literature, to *Autism* for consideration for publication. *Autism* accepts manuscripts of 5000 words or approximately 20 pages. Chapter 2 is considerably longer than this limit; however, the guidelines (Appendix H) explain that, “we may be able to accept manuscripts that exceed this length, but this should be discussed with one of the editors before submission.” I am in the process of discussing this possibility.

Chapter 3 provides findings from and discussion of my research, and includes limitations and areas for future research. I will submit the Chapter 3 manuscript to *Focus on Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, which suggests manuscripts be 15-30 pages long. My manuscript is overlong so as to be informative to the committee; it is likely that it will result in more than one manuscript. Regardless of the number of resultant manuscripts, the methods section will be reduced significantly prior to submission.

The reader will find eight appendices following the comprehensive reference list. As mentioned, these include the guidelines for submission (appendix H) and the interview questions that are appendices A and B for Chapter 3. In addition I have included for reference the appendices from the approved proposal that guided this research.

Qualitative research is not detached, nor is the qualitative researcher a passive observer (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). By the same token the writing should not project an uninvolved investigator. Writers who want to emphasize their similarity to their readers write less formally and usually in the first person (Becker, 1986); hence I write in the first person in order to appeal to many audiences (Ragin et al., 2004).

## CHAPTER 2

### FRIENDSHIP AND INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS:

#### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Researchers and theorists believe that friendships, especially in adolescence, are critical to healthy development (Berndt, 1982; Berndt & Perry, 1986; Buhrmester, 1990; Sullivan, 1953; Zarbatany, Hartmann, & Rankin, 1990). Thus, a general understanding of friendship is a prerequisite to examining individual differences in friendship experiences. With adolescence comes change in the social skills needed to support friendships. Adolescents must be able to initiate conversations and relationships, maintain secrets and share sensitive information, e.g. “Someone likes you”, and provide emotional support to friends, and at the same time be honest and manage disagreements sensitively (Buhrmester, 1990). Intimate adolescent friends support each other as they adjust to pubertal changes, new environments, and additional social expectations (Buhrmester, 1990; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Although intimacy is provided by family as well as friends, during early adolescence peers become more important companions than parents (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). If the need for intimate friendship is left unsatisfied an individual may experience heightened feelings of alienation, loneliness, and depression (Buhrmester, 1990; Klin & Volkmar, 1996; Sullivan, 1953). The risk of these heightened feelings may be especially pronounced for those individuals with autism spectrum disorders who “are not loners by choice,” but who experience repeated failures in forming or maintaining intimate relationships (Klin & Volkmar, 1996, p. 6).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to review current research regarding the conceptions of friendship held by individuals with autism spectrum disorders. A comprehensive review of how friendship is appreciated by these individuals may contribute to our understanding of how they socialize. The presence of social skills may be directly related to children's development of friendship, but their friendships may augment developing social skills as well (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). With greater knowledge of early adolescent friendships, researchers would be better equipped to answer questions about how relationships, or the lack thereof, affect the social development of people with autism spectrum disorders.

Scientists characterize autism spectrum disorders as conditions that result in behavioral differences in social interaction and communication and repetitive behaviors and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Knowledge of these characteristics can be informative, but should not be construed as providing a complete picture of how people with autism spectrum disorders socialize. At least two of the four general social characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorders must be present for a diagnosis, and all of these directly relate to friendship development. The four characteristics are: (1) a noticeable impairment in the use of nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye contact); (2) a failure to develop peer relationships; (3) a lack of sharing enjoyment, interests, or achievements with others; and (4) a lack of perceived social or emotional reciprocity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

To date, the vast majority of research related to the socialization of individuals with autism spectrum disorders focuses on the development of discrete social skills, many of which affect establishing and maintaining friendships. Examples include sharing

(Carpenter, Pennington, & Rogers, 2002), turn-taking (Sigman et al., 1999), asking for help (Koning & Magill-Evans, 2001), using greetings (Weiss & Harris, 2001), reciprocal play (C. T. Jackson et al., 2003), establishing joint attention (Weiss & Harris, 2001), deciphering verbal and non-verbal communication and conflict resolution (LeGoff, 2004), and participating in conversation (Barry et al., 2003).

Social skills affect an individual's ability to respond or adapt to context-specific situations and age-appropriate societal expectations so this large body of research is informative; however, it provides only a small piece to the puzzle. Rather than focusing on how individuals with autism spectrum disorders perform or how others teach discrete social skills, it is essential to learn how people with autism spectrum disorders experience social contexts (e.g., working or playing with individuals or groups, establishing and maintaining friendships). This will provide valuable information regarding how these experiences might best be sustained, supported, or enhanced and will help others to appreciate how we are all similar and different.

The developmental changes in friendship expectations and the descriptions of friendship provided by preadolescents and adolescents who do not experience disabilities have received substantial attention over the past several decades (e.g., Berndt, 1982, 2004; Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hoza, 1987; Chu, 2005; La Gaipa, 1979; Sullivan, 1953). It is only in the past six years that a limited number of research studies have been published that relate to the ways individuals with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). Additionally, people with autism spectrum

disorders are writing autobiographies that provide first hand and retrospective accounts of living with the condition (e.g., Grandin & Scariano, 1986; L. Jackson, 2002; Willey, 1999; D. Williams, 1992).

In this article I review the empirical literature that relates to the ways individuals with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship. I contextualize results within the larger friendship literature based on the general population. In addition I review major findings in three areas of interest: (1) how the conceptions of friendship held by individuals with autism spectrum disorders are similar to and different from “normative” samples, (2) how methodologies used to study friendship might be adapted in order to achieve a better understanding of how friendship is understood by individuals with autism spectrum disorders, and (3) directions for future research in this area.

### Conducting the Search

Before I began this review I familiarized myself with the general literature on friendship with a search for peer-reviewed articles that described the perceptions of friendship in the general population. A complex construct such as friendship is difficult to define. An Aristotelian perspective defines “friendship as a practical and emotional relationship of mutual and (roughly) equal goodwill, affection and pleasure” (Badhwar, 1987, p. 1). Modern interpretations suggest friendships are defined in terms of exchanges between two people that display significant mutual support, revealed in frequent and varied interactions with each other, which are maintained over an extended period (Kelley et al., 1983). The importance and degree of “significant,” “frequent,” or “extended” is unclear, but it is apparent that there is more to friendship than a single or chance meeting of relative strangers. Friendship is further characterized by relatively



equal reciprocity and sharing between unrelated individuals. Friendships between young children center on sharing concrete items (e.g., a toy), while adolescents and adults share support, trust, and intimacy with their friends (Youniss & Haynie, 1992).

Clearly the construct of friendship is not easy to define; rather researchers tend to rely on descriptions of how the subjects of their studies construe friendship. Therefore, friendship is what each individual believes it to be, and researchers who are interested in learning about children's friendships should attempt to understand the construct from the perspective of the children they are studying (Rubin, 1980). I relied on many references to complete this article, but several reviews of this general friendship literature were especially helpful. I refer interested readers to the following for more information:

(Berndt, 1982, 2004; Bukowski, 2001; Hartup, 1993; Ladd, 2005; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Youniss & Haynie, 1992).

In order to complete this review, my first step was to conduct a broad literature search on people with autism spectrum disorders and how they perceive friendship. I used several computer databases: *Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts*, *Sociological Abstracts*, *Cambridge Scientific Abstracts*, *Education Full-Text*, *ERIC*, *ISI Web of Science*, *OVID*, *PsychArticles*, *PsychInfo*, *PubMed*, *Sage Full Text*, and *Social Sciences Citation Index*. Keywords and phrases used were "autism," "Asperger," or "high-functioning autism" and "friend," "friendship," "peer relationship," or "interpersonal." Search results were limited to peer-reviewed journals. Second, I searched reference lists in journal articles, dissertations, and book chapters for relevant resources. Third, after reading the articles found in broad searches, I narrowed my investigation to two categories: those that referenced the personal perspectives of participants who live with a

label on the autism spectrum regarding their friends or understanding of friendships, and those that described the perspective of parents of individuals with autism spectrum disorders regarding their child's friends or friendships.

I put no temporal restrictions on my search, and studies with all age groups were included. Eight studies met my parameters and all, with the notable exception of Molloy's and Vasil's (2004) *Asperger syndrome, adolescence, and identity: Looking beyond the label*, were published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2004. Brief descriptions of these studies, including demographics, methodologies, and results, are located in Table 2.1.

Researchers have proposed that people with autism spectrum disorders may perceive friendship differently from the general population (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000). The eight studies included here reflect descriptions of friendship from 117 people with autism spectrum disorders, while a similar, but non-exhaustive search of the general friendship literature yielded 216 references that reflected insight from thousands of individuals. This literature is sparse and only touches on how people with autism spectrum disorders understand this complex construct. The studies included in this review are informative in a cursory way; however, none provides a clear description of the individuals' perceptions of friendship, though all the studies provide allusions to people with autism spectrum disorders and their friendships. Nevertheless the studies included in this review begin to shed light on this question relative to the broader literature that surrounds typically developing children and adolescents.

Table 2.1 Research included in this review related to autism spectrum disorders and friendship perceptions.

Author/Year	Study Purpose(s)	Sample/Sources of Data	Results
Bauminger & Kasari (2000)	Explored the constructs of loneliness and friendship in children with “high-functioning” autism.	21 boys and 1 girl with HFA ages 7.11-14.8 years and 18 boys and 1 girl with typical development ages 7.8-14.5 years. Loneliness Rating Scale Friendship Qualities Scale Interviews with children (3 questions) Reports from mothers.	All children reported having at least one friend. Children with autism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reported greater loneliness and less satisfaction with their friendships.</li> <li>• Defined loneliness as being alone, but not feeling sadness.</li> <li>• Defined a friend in terms of companionship, affection and intimacy less often.</li> <li>• Demonstrated understandings of friendship, but not how to use friendship to reduce loneliness.</li> </ul>
Bauminger & Shulman (2003)	Explored the process by which friendships are developed and maintained by children with autism from the perspective of their mothers	Mothers of 28 children, 14 with “high-functioning” autism (mean age=10.45 years) and 14 with typical development (mean age=11.72 years)—12 boys and 2 girls in each group. ADI-R to confirm diagnosis Parents’ Early Childhood Friendship Survey Demographic questionnaire	Children with autism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Had fewer friendships of shorter duration and with less frequent meetings.</li> <li>• Were more likely to form friendships with children with disabilities.</li> <li>• Engaged in more sedentary and structured activities that required less social interaction with their friends.</li> <li>• Had at least one mutual friendship.</li> <li>• Generally required mediation from parents or teachers to facilitate friendship development.</li> </ul>

Carrington & Graham (2001)	Presentation of the challenges faced by adolescent boys with Asperger syndrome and an insight into their social world.	Two, 13 year old boys w/ AS. Semi-structured interviews (questions provided in advance) lasting 40-60 minutes (videotaped and transcribed). Interviews with mothers (audio-taped and transcribed).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described the specific difficulties that the boys have in establishing, understanding, and interpreting friendships.</li> <li>• As they entered their teens the boys were aware they did not “fit in” and tried to mask their deficits.</li> <li>• Behavior difficulties may be a result of stress.</li> <li>• Noted developmental differences, problems associated with general characteristics of AS, stress, and masquerading.</li> </ul>
Australia			
Carrington, Templeton, & Papinczak (2003)	Explored the social worlds of individuals with Asperger syndrome, and their perceptions of friendship.	One girl (age 14) and 4 boys (ages 15-18) w/ AS. 20-40 minute semi-structured interviews (questions provided in advance) regarding the students’ understanding of friendship (audio-taped and transcribed).	<p>The adolescents with Asperger syndrome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described what friends are and who would not be friends, but had difficulty explaining friendship.</li> <li>• Participated in a limited variety of activities with friends.</li> <li>• Coped with their awareness of “not fitting in” by trying to mask their social deficits.</li> <li>• Had difficulty discussing friendship with interviewers.</li> </ul>
Australia			
Church, Alinsanski, & Amanullah (2000)	Described the social, academic, and behavioral experiences of children with Asperger syndrome across	39 boys and 1 girl with Asperger syndrome (3-17 years old) followed at the child development program for at least 2 visits. Retrospective chart review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the elementary years social skill difficulties were more evident and none had deep reciprocal relationships with other children.</li> <li>• During middle school, parents reported improvements but continuing weakness in social abilities. Half of these children identified a best friend; however</li> </ul>

United States	12 years.	examined for background information and analyzed for parent and physician comments and observations, and teacher reports.	<p>children expressed sadness, anxiety, and rejection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social skills continued to be the major area of difficulty in high school. Each had at least one friend.</li> <li>• Across the years most desired peer relationships but lacked the necessary skills and social knowledge.</li> </ul>
Marks, et al. (2000)	To provide an insider's view of Asperger syndrome.	3 boys w/ AS (13-15 years old) provided one, semi-structured interview each (30-60 minutes).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adolescents expressed a narrow range of topic-based (rather than object-based) interests.</li> <li>• All experienced isolation, loneliness, and challenges on a daily basis at school.</li> </ul>
United States		<p>Three, semi-structured focus group discussions with behavioral supervisors (6 hours).</p> <p>One focus group discussion with aides (2.5 hours).</p> <p>One phone interview with parents (1-1.5 hours).</p> <p>All were audio-taped and transcribed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each desired friendships, but generally lacked friends.</li> <li>• Found deficits typical of a diagnosis of AS.</li> <li>• Adolescents with AS need increased social opportunities and social skills training.</li> </ul>
Molloy & Vasil (2004)	Shared the expertise of teenagers living with Asperger syndrome and how the label affected their schooling,	Six adolescents (4 males and 2 females between 12-18 years old) with AS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The diagnosis provided families with an explanation for their child's unusual behavior.</li> <li>• The extent to which the teens identified with the diagnosis of AS and defined themselves by the label varied.</li> </ul>
Singapore and the United		<p>Multiple, open-ended interviews with each</p> <p>Parent interviews.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The biggest stumbling block was socializing and</li> </ul>

Kingdom	identity, and relationships.	All audio-taped and transcribed. Reviews of pertinent documents.	making friends. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainstream schooling posed a dilemma.</li> <li>• The adolescents were reticent to discuss their family lives, but most enjoyed close relationships.</li> <li>• The adolescents described strong feelings of anger and depression.</li> </ul>
Portway & Johnson (2003)	To explore the life experiences of young adults with Asperger syndrome, in relation to health outcomes in adulthood.	18 young adults w/ AS (18-35 years). Interviews with each. Interviews with 16 parents. Some interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, others were completed with notes only.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reported feeling that they do not “quite fit in” socially.</li> <li>• As young children they were described as “loners.”</li> <li>• Transition from childhood to adolescence was particularly difficult.</li> <li>• Reported a desire for but a lack of friends and understanding how to establish friendships.</li> <li>• Felt their schools had failed them.</li> <li>• Difficulties associated with living with AS in today’s society.</li> </ul>

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In the next sections I summarize results from the studies included in this review. I then examine critically the research methodologies used by these investigators, as well as by researchers in the general friendship literature to consider how they can be effective for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Finally, I provide suggestions for future research.

### Difficult but Desirable

Perceptions of friendship change as individuals mature although friends of all ages share common interests and activities. Early childhood friends are generally those who join in activities and who have opportunities to play (Selman, 1980). By preadolescence children recognize that reciprocal friendship—two children call each other “friend” or “best friend”—involves sharing, respect, kindness and affection, and they are aware that friends have similar values, support each other, and share intimate information (Hartup, 1993). Adolescents’ relationships are characterized by interdependence and intimacy as well as a respect for the other’s autonomy (Berndt, 1982; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Selman, Jaquette, & Lavin, 1977; Sullivan, 1953). Researchers have found that typically-developing children and their friends are markedly similar in terms of gender, age, race, and social class (Berndt & Perry, 1990; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Collins, 1997; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Hartup, 1993; Johnson, 2004). Friends select one another based on their similarities (Hartup, 1993).

Having said that, friendships are not all alike; they may vary in terms of gender, culture, race, or disability contexts. One generalization, seemingly supported by the research (e.g., Berndt, 1982; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Bukowski et al., 1987; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997), is that male friendships are less

intimate than female friendships; however researchers must be careful not to over-interpret this gender difference (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). Research on adolescent friendships has primarily involved middle-class Caucasian adolescents, (e.g., Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Johnson, 2004) therefore the majority of theories about friendships do not reflect the experiences of a large portion of the population although researchers are beginning to address this gap (e.g., Giordano, Cernkovich, & DeMaris, 1993; Way & Chen, 2000).

A long-held generalization regarding people labeled with autism spectrum disorders is that they prefer isolation and avoid social situations (Kanner, 1943). During preschool and early elementary school parents and teachers may perceive children with autism spectrum disorders as “loners” who prefer solitary activities rather than engaging with peers (Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). This lends support to Kanner’s theory. However, highly verbal preadolescents (10-14-years-old) and adolescents (15-18-years-old) with autism spectrum disorders say they are aware of their social differences and are concerned about friendship more so than when they were younger (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003) thus challenging the idea that they prefer isolation. Even though socialization is often arduous, people with autism spectrum disorders do want and often have friends (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003).



As is typical, friends of children with autism spectrum disorders tend to be the same age and gender (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004) although a few participants in several studies described friends who were more than a year younger or older than themselves more often than is normally found (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). Children with autism spectrum disorders share common interests and engage in mutually enjoyable activities with their friends (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004) and in this respect their friendships are analogous to the general population.

#### *Quantity of and Interactions with Friends*

Most adolescents, even on anonymous questionnaires, designate someone as their best friend (Hartup, 1993). Typically developing preadolescents have a range of two to six close friends (Claes, 1992; Heiman, 2000; Reisman & Shorr, 1978). The majority of those with autism spectrum disorders have one to two close friends (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). Individual participants in three studies said they had no friends (Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Portway & Johnson, 2003), but this was not dissimilar to the general population where a few children in several studies note having no friends (Hartup, 1995; Haselager, Cillessen, Van Lieshout, Riksen-Walraven, & Hartup, 2002; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Schneider, Wiener, & Murphy, 1994).

Preadolescents generally develop successful friendships out of common experiences and identify others with whom they are more likely to be compatible (Asher,

Parker, & Walker, 1996; Zaratany, Ghesquiere, & Mohr, 1992). The majority of respondents with autism spectrum disorders report that they find it difficult to establish and maintain friendships (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). This difficulty may impact the quantity of close friendships they experience.

The mothers of typically developing preadolescents noted that their children's friendships developed with limited maternal intervention in contrast to reports from mothers who say that their children with autism spectrum disorders rely on their support to establish and maintain friendships (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003). Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders helped their youngsters identify appropriate friends, arrange regular after school play dates and special outings (e.g., going to the movies), and find common interests and mutually enjoyable activities; thus they played an important role in the quantity of friendships their children experienced (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003) although they did not necessarily affect the quality of those friendships.

#### *Quality of Friendships*

Reisman (1985) asserts that there seems to be no social competence benefits to having more than one or two close friends. It appears that it is the quality of the friendships not the quantity of friends that determines the development of social competence (Claes, 1992; Reisman, 1985). Many articles explore the quality of friendships in the general population (e.g., Azmitia, Ittel, & Radmacher, 2005; Berndt, 2004; Bukowski, 2001; Claes, 1992; Erdley, Nangle, Newman, & Carpenter, 2001; Hartup, 1995; Kelley et al., 1983; La Gaipa, 1979; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Zaratany et al., 1992). Good quality friendships are

characterized by frequent interactions, supportiveness, equality, trust, intimacy, reciprocity, and permanence. Permanence describes the degree to which a relationship is stable (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Familial relationships are generally permanent, that is, parents and siblings typically remain in one's life regardless of conflicts or stressors (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). In contrast, friendships are voluntary and built around mutually supportive relations where committed friends focus on maximizing mutual benefits (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). If friends do not realize relatively equal support, reciprocity, or intimacy within a friendship, the relationship is more likely to dissolve.

Limited empirical research relates specifically to the quality of friendships of people with autism spectrum disorders. Despite having an inadequate base several investigators theorized that the friendships of those with autism spectrum disorders may differ in quality from children without a social disability (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Portway & Johnson, 2003). In these studies, frequency of contact and permanence of friendships were touched on in particular.

Beginning in preadolescence best friends generally connect with each other for several hours each day by socializing at school, talking on the phone, instant messaging, and/or hanging out (Adler & Adler, 1998; Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1993). Bauminger and Shulman (2003) found that participants with autism spectrum disorders got together with their friends from less than once to seven times per week, but they did not document the duration of those meetings, nor whether the participants emailed or phoned their friends. In three other studies the frequency of contact was not explicitly reported but one to two meetings per month were noted by some individuals with autism spectrum disorders

(Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004), with the exception of one participant, Sarah, who gets together with at least one of her good friends several times each week outside of school (Molloy & Vasil, 2004). Adolescents with autism spectrum disorders may not be as willing to devote significant time to their friendships (Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). They may see their friends less often or have less stable friendships (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). However, at least three participants in two different studies explained that it is important to remain friends for a long time (Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004).

High-quality friendships are voluntary and equitable (Giordano, 2003; Hartup, 1993; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Self-interest must be weighed against consideration for the other person; friends respect each other's needs and neither should retain superior power (Hartup, 1993). In mutually beneficial friendships the dyad collaborates and "co-constructs rules and responsibilities" so that power is shared and interactions and outcomes are equitable (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997, p. 753). In addition to mutually satisfying companionship, typically developing adolescents assume their friends will help and share with them. Adolescents expect their friends to be supportive, trustworthy, and loyal (Berndt & Murphy, 2002). Friends stick up for each other in difficult situations and include each other in their plans and activities.

Of adolescent participants with autism spectrum disorders in three separate studies, 40-50% said equality is important in friendships (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). Informants with autism spectrum disorders regard "loyalty and the absence of ulterior motives for the friendship" (Molloy

& Vasil, 2004, p. 129), and maintaining contact, being trustworthy, keeping promises, and “sticking up for each other” (Carrington et al., 2003, p. 214) as perhaps the most important characteristics of friendship. In their study of loneliness and friendship, Bauminger and Kasari (2000) found that 41% of their participants with autism (as opposed to 73.7% of comparison group) included affective dimensions in their definition of friendship as measured by “The Friendship Qualities Scale” (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). The affective dimension included conflict as well as indications of equality including thinking about their friends and the realization that a friend is someone who cares about and helps them. Children with autism spectrum disorders rated their best friendship lower on the positive features of security and helpfulness, but not higher on the negative feature of conflict than the typically developing comparison group (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). In other words, though children with autism spectrum disorders ranked their best friendships as less secure and helpful they did not also rate them as having greater conflict.

Sadly, there are indications that children with autism spectrum disorders tolerate inequality in their friendships. Younger participants and their parents said anyone who was nice to them, sat by them, or said hello in the hallway was considered a friend (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000). A child with autism might find that others take advantage of his ready availability for play or intellectual abilities to help them complete schoolwork (Church et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). Though these are opportunities for peer social interaction some relationships may be more exploitive than supportive and were perceived by some participants as such (Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson,

2003). The potential for inequality is illustrated by what one participant, Paul, 23, said when he looked back at a childhood friendship, “There was one boy, but even he was only a friend when it suited him, when there was no one else to play with, he was only a superficial friend” (Portway & Johnson, 2003, p. 438).

In close dyadic relationships, friends are sensitive to the needs of one another and seek relative equality and mutual satisfaction (Shulman & Knafo, 1997). By adolescence typically developing friends rely on each other to share information, clarify feelings, and provide emotional and personal validation as well as critical feedback (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). For many, intimacy becomes essential. Intimacy is generally considered to be the key differentiation between friendships in middle childhood and adolescence, and is heralded as the defining element of friendships during early adolescence (Berndt, 2004; Hartup, 1993; Sullivan, 1953). Intimacy involves two people and signifies closeness, caring, commitment, and disclosure between friends (Shulman et al., 1997; Sullivan, 1953). Intimate friends share personal preferences, ideas, secrets, thoughts, and feelings and they support each other emotionally, secure in the knowledge that they can trust each other (Berndt, 1982; Bigelow, 1977; Shulman et al., 1997). Trust is particularly important in close, intimate friendships (Chu, 2005; Erdley et al., 2001; Giordano, 2003; Prager, 1995).

Children with autism spectrum disorders may not incorporate intimacy as often in their definition of friendship—40.9% of children with autism spectrum disorders compared with 68.4% of typically developing children (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000)—and there is limited evidence that some other adolescents with autism spectrum disorders valued and desired intimate relationships (Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004).

Adolescents with autism spectrum disorders found it challenging to make and sustain such friendships (Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). Conversely, some may not pursue intimate friendships and seem satisfied with relationships surrounding shared interests (Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000).

Best friendships involve reciprocity and shared attraction (i.e., two people nominate each other as best friends). Preadolescents describe close friends as understanding, loyal, and trustworthy (Azmitia et al., 2005; Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986; Berndt & Perry, 1990; Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975; Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Shulman et al., 1997; Way, Gingold, Rotenberg, & Kuriakose, 2005). Frequent, diverse, enduring, and mutually satisfying and responsive interactions characterize these close relationships (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Reciprocity implies that friends share the sacrifices as well as the rewards of their interactions (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997).

Though all named friends, only four of the six adolescents in Molloy and Vasil's (2004) inquiry described reciprocal best friendships based on caring and commitment. The children in Bauminger and Kasari's (2000) study all identified at least one best friend; however, some of their mothers indicated that though their children desired best friends, they would classify their nominations as acquaintances rather than close friends. Although half of their preadolescent and adolescent participants identified best friends, parents (Church et al., 2000) and researchers (Carrington et al., 2003) suggested the relationships were superficial. Reciprocity delineates a close emotional tie between children (Youniss & Haynie, 1992).

For many of these individuals the absence of identified best friends may be due to

a lack of close relationships or a problem in the methods that the researchers used. None of the studies included in this review used reciprocal nomination methods to verify descriptions of friendships, so it is speculative as to how many had genuine best friends. Likewise it would be conjecture to suggest that this might reflect a different perception of friendship held by children with autism spectrum disorders; it might also reflect their need and desire for friends or a poor understanding of the terms “best friend” and acquaintance. Further methodology concerns are discussed in the following section.

### *Summary*

The small number of relevant studies and inconclusive findings make it difficult to draw conclusions about how people with autism spectrum disorders understand or experience friendship. Admittedly, how participants understood friendship was just one component of all but one of these studies (Carrington et al., 2003); however, all studies included descriptions of friendship from the perspective of individuals with autism spectrum disorders or from their mothers’ perspectives. As opposed to a preference for isolation it is clear that people with autism spectrum disorders do want friends and do have friends, although some find it difficult to understand what is involved in establishing and maintaining friendships. They share common interests with friends and engage in mutually enjoyable activities, but it is unclear what frequency of contact they desire. There is insufficient information to determine: (1) whether people with autism spectrum disorders perceive the quality of friendship differently from those without social disabilities; (2) how these individuals experience friendship; or (3) whether they desire more friends, better quality friendships, or both. Nonetheless, there are indications that their perceptions are similar to “normative” samples.



### Methodological Considerations

The majority of the studies in this review used some form of interview technique (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). A few sociometrics were used in the studies under review: “Loneliness Rating Scale” and “Friendship Qualities Scale” (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000), and “Early Childhood Friendship Survey” (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003). Church, et al. (2000) conducted retrospective chart reviews while Marks, et al. (2000) led focus group discussions. In addition to a preponderance of inventories, questionnaires, and surveys (Azmitia et al., 2005; e.g., Bukowski et al., 1987; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) and some interviews (e.g., Way et al., 2005; Zaratany et al., 1992), the general friendship literature reflects the use of essays (e.g., Bigelow, 1977; Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975; Gonzalez, Moreno, & Schneider, 2004), and ethnography (e.g., Chu, 2005; Schneider et al., 1994). Any of these could be used when studying the friendships of individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

#### *Interviewing*

Of the eight studies only one explored the perceptions of friendship among adolescents with autism spectrum disorders as its explicit purpose (Carrington et al., 2003). The authors uncovered limited information regarding friendships from their participants. During short 20-40 minute individual interviews with each of their five participants the researchers asked ten primary questions, provided in advance, plus 19 additional probing questions. Rather than revealing the teenagers’ perceptions of friendship in their conclusions Carrington et al. (2003) focused on verifying the social

deficits of an autism spectrum disorder (i.e., Asperger syndrome) described in the literature. For example, the authors discussed, based on their brief interviews, that their participants demonstrated an inability to consider fully others' perspectives and to understand their own feelings and behaviors as Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith (1985) described. In addition Carrington et al. (2003) said that their informants showed cognitive inflexibility (Frith, 1996). It may be that the authors did not so much confirm features of autism spectrum disorders as they uncovered a feature of adolescence—a desire for privacy (Adler & Adler, 1998), as well as problems with their research methodology.

In order to study people as they go about their lives, investigators need to develop rapport with participants in their research (Emerson et al., 1995). Several researchers attempted to develop an understanding of their participants' social worlds with no relationship or time to build rapport (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000). For example, regarding one of their participants Marks et al. (2000) noted that it was “obvious from these interview excerpts that being interviewed [was] difficult for Thomas, despite his above average language skills” (p. 6). They did not discuss any limitations in their methods nor how they as researchers may have contributed to Thomas's “poor” results. Meeting with participants prior to formal interviews may help ease anxiety associated with the interview process (Siedman, 1998) and may support more in-depth responses from participants who find social situations challenging.

In addition, iterative interviews may facilitate information sharing. Molloy and Vasil (2004) conducted multiple interviews with each of their participants, and collected much deeper descriptions from their informants than did others who incorporated single,

brief 20-60 minute interviews to gather information (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Portway & Johnson, 2003). Sixty minutes is a very short time in which to discuss a construct as complex as friendship without other aspects of socialization (e.g., loneliness) that some researchers also investigated in that short time frame (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Marks et al., 2000; Portway & Johnson, 2003). This may be particularly hard for those with acknowledged difficulties in social situations such as interviews. Multiple interviews allow participants time to reflect on their responses and further supports the research relationship thereby encouraging more in-depth answers, which may yield more informative results especially for studies intended to provide an insiders' perspective of their social world.

Two research groups provided interview questions to their participants in advance (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003). This is not uncommon when conducting interviews; however, unfamiliar social situations like interviews can be disconcerting for people with autism spectrum disorders, so providing questions in advance might decrease stress and foster more in-depth answers. Two teams who used semi-structured interviewing did not provide questions in advance (Marks et al., 2000; Portway & Johnson, 2003); it is unclear whether this affected productivity and depth of information.

One research team varied their interview locations based on their participants' preferences (Portway & Johnson, 2003), another conducted all interviews at the participants' homes (Molloy & Vasil, 2004), while two others used the students' school sites for their interviews (Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000). These authors

recognized that new and unfamiliar settings are frequently difficult for people with autism spectrum disorders. It is important to consider comfort and familiarity when interviewing anyone, but perhaps particularly so for those who find socio-communicative exchanges challenging.

### *Sociometric Devices*

In addition to brief interviews, Bauminger and Kasari (2000) used the “Loneliness Rating Scale” and “Friendship Qualities Scale” to explore the constructs of loneliness and friendship with their participants. On the “Friendship Qualities Scale” (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994) children are asked to think about their best friend when they answer 23 questions, on a five-point scale, based on the way they perceive the friendship currently as opposed to how they want it to be (Bukowski et al., 1994). The 23 questions on this scale reflect five categories: companionship, conflict, help, security, and closeness. The subjects in the Bukowski, et al. (1994) study, which found the scale to be reliable, were 297 fifth to seventh graders who “represented a cross-section of the SES spectrum” in northern New England (p. 478). There was no mention of any child who had any disability in the test group, whether the scale was reliable for people on the autism spectrum, nor how people with this label construed the questions.

The “Loneliness Rating Scale” is a 24-item questionnaire comprised of 16 primary questions (e.g., “It’s easy for me to make new friends at school”) and eight filler questions, e.g., “I like to read”). This scale is designed to assess children’s feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984). Asher et al. (1984) found their scale internally reliable based on data from 506 children in third to sixth grades from “20 classrooms in two schools” in a mid-western city (p. 1457). As

with the “Friendship Qualities Scale” there was no mention of children with disabilities participating in this reliability study, nor if the “Loneliness Rating Scale” was appropriate for children with autism spectrum disorders.

An early iteration of the “Playmates and Friends Questionnaire” (Buysse, 1993) matches the description of closed and open-ended questions evaluating the nature, development, and maintenance of friendship in children, which Bauminger and Shulman (2003) referred to as the Early Childhood Friendship Survey.” The “Playmates and Friends Questionnaire” was designed for teachers of preschoolers (Buysse, 1993). The currently available “Playmates and Friends Questionnaire for Teachers, Revised” (Goldman & Buysse, 2005) was developed for teachers to document the number and nature of children’s relationships with peers and how their friendships are supported in early childhood settings (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2003). Buysse et al. (2003) asked 45 teachers from nine childcare centers and nine early intervention programs to complete the questionnaire regarding 120 children (aged 19 to 77 months) with disabilities. They reported that 40% of these children had a “severe disability” on at least one of nine domains: “audition, behavior, intellectual functioning, limbs, intentional communication, tonicity, integrity of physical health, eyes, and structural status” and compared their results to results related to 213 typically developing children (aged 21 to 65 months) (p. 489). Although it was not clear what particular disabilities were evidenced in the Buysse et al. (2003) research, some of the domains are related to autism spectrum disorders, therefore this device, completed by teachers, may be reflective of children with autism spectrum disorders.

There are several problems associated with the sociometrics used in studies with

children with autism spectrum disorders (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003). First, it is not clear that the measures are reliable for these children. Some people with autism spectrum disorders interpret text more narrowly than those without a disability (Happé, 1994; Ochs et al., 2004) so results based on such devices must be interpreted cautiously. Second, Bauminger and Shulman's (2003) participants had a mean age of 10.45 years (group with autism) and 11.72 years (control group) and the "Playmates and Friends Questionnaire" was intended for early childhood educators, so it may not reflect friendship expectations associated with preadolescents. Third, "the study of friendship is one area of research where males tend to be compared against a female-centered standard" (Giordano, 2003, p. 262). Given that males comprise the majority of people with autism spectrum disorders, these measures may be insufficient for this population. Fourth, inventories, scales, and questionnaires allow objective measurement, but they do not allow for a complete picture of friendship. Having said that, scales such as those described above, and others described in the general friendship literature (e.g., "The Network of Relationships Inventory" Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), may be easier for some children with autism spectrum disorders to complete, since there is less social interaction required to complete an inventory than there is to participate in an interview. In addition, sociometrics may provide a point of departure for more in-depth explorations of friendship.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups are generally comprised of seven to ten people who do not know each other well but who share some common characteristics, plus an interviewer who asks questions that focus on one topic designed to encourage discussion and elaboration

on differing viewpoints for a more complete exploration of a theme (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In addition to brief interviews with the boys (30-60 minutes) and phone interviews with their parents (60-90 minutes), Marks et al. (2000) conducted three focus group discussions (six hours total) with the seven clinical supervisors (including the four authors) who provided behavioral consultation to the three participants with Asperger syndrome. They also conducted one focus group with the one-to-one support people (2.5 hours) who work directly with the students in order to “provide an insider’s view of [Asperger syndrome]” (p. 4).

Though focus groups can provide valuable information, it troubled me that the greatest amount of data-gathering time was spent with people who knew the boys with Asperger syndrome least well (i.e., the clinical supervisors). This imbalance of time spent prompts me to think that rather than an “insider’s view” the authors provided a professionals’ view. In addition, the first two authors both led and participated in the focus group discussions. This is problematic. As facilitators their opinions may have biased the questions they asked, and as participants their opinions may have held excessive influence in the focus group. Further, given that the clinical supervisors work together, they may have had similar views of autism spectrum disorders which might have biased the discussion overall.

Used differently, focus groups have the potential to be less threatening than interviews for individuals with autism spectrum disorders because focus groups require less constant involvement from each of the participants; however, they also create a more complex social situation in which to participate. Focus groups can provide an opportunity to refine interview questions or to get to know individuals prior to one-to-one interviews.

Focus groups conducted with children with autism spectrum disorders could provide good information regarding their understanding of friendship.

#### *Other Methods*

Two other methods that are used to study the perceptions of friendship in the general population are the essay and ethnography. The essay method is used with the help of teachers who ask their students to think about their same-gender best friend and to write an essay about what they expect from their best friends that differs from what they expect from other acquaintances (Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975). The researchers then analyze the essays and code themes on each of 21 friendship expectation dimensions (Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975). This method was not used in the studies reviewed here, but it might be effective with children with autism spectrum disorders who communicate primarily through writing or typing, who have limited verbal speech, or who find the social aspects of interviewing difficult. Some adaptations would be necessary for students with autism spectrum disorders: (1) rather than as part of a whole class, students with autism spectrum disorders may need a small group or private work area to complete writing; (2) they may also need a longer time than general students to complete the writing assignment; and (3) additional instructions or verbal or visual prompts may be necessary to elicit information.

All of the methods discussed above provide insight into how friendship is understood by individuals; however there may be important features of friendship which children find difficult to express. Ethnography enables the researcher to assess directly actual relationships through observations over time as well as through interviews. An ethnographer participates in the daily settings of her participants and develops



relationships with the people in the environment, all while observing what is going on (Emerson et al., 1995). Schneider et al. (1994) suggest that researchers need to gain a deeper understanding of adolescent friendships than can be achieved through sociometric devices, essays, and interviews. It is “important to observe actual interactions between friends in order to identify interaction sequences that are crucial to their friendship” (Schneider et al., 1994, p. 329). The goal of ethnography is to develop an accurate account of the world of the subjects (Anderson, 2004), in this case the friendships of preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders. It has been used effectively with preadolescents (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998), despite concerns that they may not allow outsiders access to intimate exchanges with their friends (Schneider et al., 1994). As a research method, ethnography is accommodating to difficulties and differences, and could provide an in-depth perspective of how individuals with autism spectrum disorders understand and experience friendship.

Particular research questions determine what methodology is selected. Each of these methods is applicable to the study of friendship and all could be used with people with autism spectrum disorders. The considerations described above may assist researchers in their gathering data from participants in future investigations.

### Future Research

This literature review uncovers several areas for future research. First, there is a clear need for more thorough research regarding descriptions of friendship from the viewpoint of those who live with labels on the autism spectrum. Undoubtedly there is very little information on which to base an understanding of how those labeled with an autism spectrum disorder understand friendship. I concur with previous investigators that

additional qualitative research is necessary, whether through one-to-one interviews, focus groups, or ethnography, in order to achieve a more in-depth appreciation of the real-life social experiences of people with autism spectrum disorders (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003).

Second, it is crucial to examine the quality of the friendships that children with autism spectrum disorders experience and desire. Although researchers theorize that the quality of friendships of those with autism spectrum disorders may differ from children without a social disability (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Portway & Johnson, 2003), only Bauminger and Kasari (2000) measured friendship quality. As discussed, many factors affect quality, therefore it is important to examine the multiple features. Inquiry as related to people with autism spectrum disorders should include: (1) the frequency and kind of contact desired with friends, (2) how children perceive and experience equality and reciprocity in their friendships, (3) how they work to achieve mutual benefits for their friends and themselves, and (4) what degree of intimacy they desire in their friendships. In addition, although Bauminger and Kasari (2000) found that children with autism spectrum disorders did not rate their best friendship higher in terms of conflict than their typically developing comparison group, the current literature does not address how conflicts with friends are resolved, nor how disagreements affect the friendships of children with autism spectrum disorders. In order to assess quality, information is needed about these negative aspects of friendship, as well as about the positive aspects mentioned above.

Third, it is important to investigate whether maintaining friendships is an issue for children with autism spectrum disorders. If their friendships are not of high quality they may experience more frequent turnover in their relationships (Bukowski et al., 1994). Areas for investigation include: (1) what strategies children with autism spectrum disorders use for friendship maintenance, (2) how stable their friendships are, and (3) how friendship dissolution impacts particular children.

Fourth, an investigation into how children with autism spectrum disorders approach potential friends and attempt to establish friendships is fundamental. Results of studies in this review suggest that making friends is difficult for people with autism spectrum disorders (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). However these authors did not include the ways their subjects attempt to establish or do establish friendships. As we continue to learn what children desire from friendships research may show parents and teachers how to facilitate friendship development and support maintenance of existing relationships.

Fifth, gaining a better understanding of how friendships develop over time may provide insight into what children with autism spectrum disorders desire from friendships as well as why they choose specific friends. For example, participants in several studies described friends who were significantly younger or older. Younger friends may provide practice with social skills that same-aged peers have already developed, or they may reinforce naïve social skills, while older friends may provide models of social skills that children are more or less ready to learn—further research is necessary to determine whether age differences are insignificant, beneficial, or detrimental to social development.

Sixth, investigation into the manner in which social contexts and others' expectations affect social disabilities will help researchers understand the experiences of people labeled with autism spectrum disorders. I concur with authors included in this review that research needs to determine what effect the social construction of disability has on the understanding of friendship held by people with autism spectrum disorders and on their abilities to "fit in" social situations (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). Aspects of individuals' environments and values manifests in conceptions of friendship (Gonzalez et al., 2004). Social stigma associated with labels, ignorance or intolerance of differences within the general population, an individual's impression that he is different or somehow less valuable, sensory difficulties effected by environmental factors, or other dilemmas may all impact an individual's understanding of or willingness to engage in friendships.

#### *Conclusion*

Numerous studies have focused on the deficits in social skills associated with autism spectrum disorders but few have been devoted to understanding their friendships. It has been useful to consider friendship from the perspective of individuals with autism spectrum disorders in comparison to those who are developing typically. Though the majority of investigations lacked depth, they did supply evidence that individuals with autism spectrum disorders desire friends, and many described friendship in ways similar to the norm. The current empirical foundation coupled with further studies conceptualized with methodologies designed to uncover deeper information may allow us to better understand friendship, how it is appreciated, and its effects on social development for people with autism spectrum disorders.

## CHAPTER 3

### PREADOLESCENT BOYS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

#### DESCRIBE FRIENDSHIP

This article provides a deeper understanding of how preadolescent boys with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship. Researchers have proposed that people with autism spectrum disorders may perceive friendship differently from the norm (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000), which reflects the medical model and its focus on identifying what is deficient about people, and formulating interventions to correct problems. I have no desire to add to the deficit perspective of autism spectrum disorders—there is ample literature to explain what people with autism spectrum disorders cannot do. My purpose is to provide an account of how preadolescent boys who carry labels on the autism spectrum describe friendship. By focusing on the personal perspectives of boys with autism spectrum disorders, I challenge those who hold a deficit view to think about these boys as unique individuals.

Though my focus is on a personal perspective of friendship, it is important for me as a researcher and reader to understand the prevailing discourse surrounding autism studies. Within the medical model of disability, autism spectrum disorders are characterized by differences in social interaction and communication as well as the presence of repetitive behaviors and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). At least two of the four general social symptoms associated with autism spectrum disorders must be present for a diagnosis, and all of these directly relate to friendship: (1) a noticeable impairment in the use of nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye

contact) used to moderate social interaction; (2) a failure to develop peer relationships; (3) a lack of sharing enjoyment, interests, or achievements with others; and (4) a lack of social or emotional reciprocity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

A long-held generalization regarding the people who are labeled with autism spectrum disorders is that they prefer isolation and avoid social situations (Kanner, 1943). In preschool and early elementary school parents and teachers may perceive children with autism spectrum disorders as “loners” who prefer solitary activities to engaging with peers (Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). This lends support to Kanner’s theory; however, these children may want social interaction but are unable to demonstrate their desires in a way that promotes friendship, or they may be isolated from peers with whom they might enjoy more interaction. Highly verbal preadolescents and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders say that they are aware of their social differences and are concerned about friendship more so than when they were younger (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003) thus they challenge the idea that the majority prefer isolation. Even though socialization may be arduous, people with autism spectrum disorders do want and do have friends (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003).

### Current Research on Friendship

Over the past several decades substantial attention has been devoted to the developmental changes in friendship expectations and the perceptions of friendship of

preadolescents and adolescents who do not experience disabilities (e.g., Berndt, 1982; Bukowski et al., 1987; Chu, 2005; La Gaipa, 1979; Sullivan, 1953). Several reviews of the general friendship literature provide background about how samples of preadolescents describe friendship; I refer the reader to the following for more information: (Berndt, 1982, 2004; Bukowski, 2001; Hartup, 1993; Ladd, 2005; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Youniss & Haynie, 1992). It is only within the past six years that a limited number of research studies have been published that relate to the ways individuals with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). This literature is sparse and barely touches on how people with autism spectrum disorders understand this complex construct. These studies are informative in a cursory way; however, none provides a clear description of friendship from the perspective of those with autism spectrum disorders (although friendship was just one component of all but one of these studies, Carrington et al., 2003).

### *Friendship Definition*

Psychologists and philosophers provide definitions of friendship for their work, but the construct of friendship is not easy to define. Researchers of the general population tend to rely on descriptions of how the participants in their studies construe friendship (Rubin, 1980). I agree that the ways individuals perceive friendship provide their own definition; nevertheless there are similarities in descriptions. For the purpose of the present study I use the following for my working definition of friendship: close

friendship includes exchanges between two people who display significant mutual support revealed in frequent and varied interactions with each other, and that are maintained over an extended period (Kelley et al., 1983). Close friendship is further characterized by relatively equal reciprocity and sharing between unrelated individuals (Bagwell et al., 2001; Hartup, 1996; Youniss & Haynie, 1992). Finally, intimacy is generally considered the key differentiation between friendships in middle childhood and adolescence, and it is heralded as the defining element of close friendships during early adolescence (Berndt, 2004; Berndt & Perry, 1990; Hartup, 1993; Sullivan, 1953). A general understanding of friendship is a critical prerequisite to an examination of individual differences in friendship experiences.

#### *Quantity of Friends*

Typically developing preadolescents have from two to six close friends (Claes, 1992; Heiman, 2000; Reisman & Shorr, 1978) while those with autism spectrum disorders have one or two close friends (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). Preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders do have friends; however, the small literature base suggests that they have fewer close friends than is typical.

Preadolescents generally identify others with whom they are more likely to be compatible and develop successful friendships out of common experiences (Asher et al., 1996; Zaratany et al., 1992). The majority of respondents with autism spectrum disorders report that they find it difficult to establish and maintain friendships (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004; Portway & Johnson, 2003). This difficulty may impact the quantity of close friendships they



experience. However, in the general friendship literature it appears that it is the quality of the friendships, not the quantity of friends, that is beneficial to social competence (Claes, 1992; Reisman, 1985).

### *Friendship Qualities*

In the general population, good quality friendships are characterized by frequent interactions, supportiveness, equality, trust, intimacy, reciprocity, and permanence (Berndt & Murphy, 2002; Giordano, 2003; Hartup, 1993; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Youniss & Haynie, 1992). There is limited empirical research related specifically to the quality of friendships that people with autism spectrum disorders experience. Despite this inadequate base, several investigators speculate that the friendships of those with autism spectrum disorders might differ in quality from children without a social disability (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Portway & Johnson, 2003). I have several concerns with this suggestion.

First, only Bauminger and Kasari (2000) assessed the quality of their participants' friendships directly. They use the "Friendship Qualities Scale" (Bukowski et al., 1994) to do so. Bukowski et al. (1994) report that this scale is reliable for the general population of children, but they do not reference including children with autism spectrum disorders in their sample. Therefore Bauminger and Kasari's (2000) results based on this scale must be interpreted cautiously. In addition, although scales do allow objective measurement, they cannot afford a complete picture of friendship. It is only conjecture whether the friendships of children with autism spectrum disorders differ in quality based on this study.

Bauminger and Shulman (2003) used the “Playmates and Friends Questionnaire” (Buysse, 1993) with the mothers of 14 children with autism spectrum disorders (mean age 10.45 years) and 14 children without disabilities (mean age 11.72 years) to investigate the process by which children establish and maintain friendships. This questionnaire was developed for preschool teachers and parents as a way to document the number and nature of young children’s relationships with peers and how their friendships are supported in early childhood settings (Buysse et al., 2003). Its use with preadolescents is questionable hence Bauminger and Shulman’s (2003) findings should likewise be read warily.

Third, Carrington et al. (2003) are the only researchers whose explicit purpose was to explore the perceptions of friendship among adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. However, these authors uncovered limited information regarding friendships from their participants, perhaps because they conducted only single, 20-40 minute individual interviews with each of their five participants. During this brief time the researchers asked ten primary questions, provided in advance, plus an additional 19 probing questions. Forty minutes is too short a period in which to discuss a construct as complex as friendship. Those with acknowledged difficulties in social situations, such as interviews, may find this process particularly hard. On the other hand, multiple interviews allow participants time to reflect on their responses, which may yield more informative results especially for studies intended to provide an insiders’ perspective of their social world. In addition, the authors did not have a prior relationship with their informants, nor did they describe, in their methodologies, time to build rapport with participants. Meeting with participants prior to formal interviews can help ease the

anxiety associated with the process (Siedman, 1998) and may support more in-depth responses from participants.

Despite these concerns, this small research base does provide certain information about the quality of friendship which preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders experience. In particular, researchers suggest that individuals with an autism spectrum disorder may see their friends less often or have less stable friendships than the general population (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). However at least three participants in two different studies explained that enduring friendships are important (Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). In four studies, the majority of preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders identified having at least one best friend (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). In three studies, 40-50% of adolescent participants with autism spectrum disorders said equality is important in friendships (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). In two studies, particular adolescents with autism spectrum disorders regard “loyalty and the absence of ulterior motives for the friendship” (Molloy & Vasil, 2004, p. 129), and maintaining contact, being trustworthy, keeping promises, and “sticking up for each other” (Carrington et al., 2003, p. 214) as perhaps the most important characteristics of friendship. Bauminger and Kasari (2000) found that just 40.9% of children with autism spectrum disorders incorporated suggestions of intimacy (“e.g., ‘A friend is someone you can share secrets with’”) in their definition of friendship as compared to 68.4% of typically developing children (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000, p. 450). Two other studies

show that some adolescents with autism spectrum disorders both value and desire intimate relationships (Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004).

Although close friendships in preadolescence are depicted typically as valuable and relatively intimate, it is also true that conflict, rivalry, disagreement, and change are an integral part of the dynamics of close relationships (Berndt & Perry, 1990; Hartup, 1993; Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnston, & Ogawa, 1993; Laursen, 1996). Forgiveness depends, in part, on the preadolescent's assessment of how deliberate a specific hurtful act is (Asher et al., 1996). Most conflicts between adolescent friends are settled amicably (Burk & Laursen, 2005); boys "seem to be good at 'agreeing to disagree'" and their friendships often survive rough play and disagreements (Pollack, 1998, p. 188). Bauminger and Kasari (2000) report that their participants with autism spectrum disorders rated their best friendships no higher in terms of conflict than did their comparison group. This is the only mention, in the existing literature, of conflict in the friendships of children with autism spectrum disorders.

In conclusion, how people with autism spectrum disorders understand and experience friendship is characterized in the extant literature from a deficit perspective primarily; based on thin findings derived from short interviews and sociometric scales. There is a clear need for more thorough investigation on the descriptions of friendship from the viewpoint of those who live with labels on the autism spectrum. In this study I incorporate multiple interviews and build rapport with my informants prior to interviewing in order to obtain more in-depth data. In this way I build on the existing research base and provide a deeper depiction of friendship from the perspective of preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders.

## Method

Qualitative research affords “people who are often studied but seldom heard” (Ferguson et al., 1992b, p. 14), such as boys with autism spectrum disorders, an opportunity to inform the research surrounding them. Interpretive phenomenology is an appropriate qualitative method to use when the research question asks for meanings of a phenomenon, such as friendship, with the purpose of understanding the human experience within the context of everyday life (Seamon, 2000). A study that employs interpretive phenomenology will enrich the literature of both the constructs of friendship and autism spectrum disorders, which, for the most part, have been studied quantitatively (e.g., Berndt, 1982; Buhrmester, 1990; Gresham et al., 2001; Klin, 2000; Koning & Magill-Evans, 2001).

### *Participants*

I used three avenues to find participants for my study. First, I presented an overview of my research to two different Autism Action Groups in Virginia and asked their members to disseminate a description of my study to potential participants. These regional groups are comprised of parents, guardians, and other family members of people labeled with autism spectrum disorders, plus professionals from schools, community services agencies, medical practices, universities, and private agencies. Second, I presented my research to special education directors in seven Virginia school divisions and requested their assistance in disseminating the information to potential participants. Third, colleagues across the commonwealth volunteered to share a description of the study with potential informants. Participation in the study was voluntary and required both parental consent and child assent. In all, eleven families contacted me for additional

information, and seven agreed to participate after discussing the project further.

These seven boys, ages 10-14 years, all of whom have good verbal communication and, according to school records, IQ in the normal to above normal range, served as primary informants for this study (see Table 3.1). Experienced psychologists or medical professionals, with expertise in the area of autism spectrum disorders, diagnosed the boys prior to the study. Multidisciplinary school teams agreed with the diagnoses as noted in the minutes from eligibility meetings. All the boys have been included in general education classes, with special education support and/or instruction, since kindergarten. All the boys are aware of their diagnosis on the spectrum, and only one preferred that I not mention it during interviews. The boys are from Caucasian, middle-to-upper middle class families. Two mothers hold Bachelor's degrees, while the remaining 12 parents have advanced degrees. All the boys live in Virginia in three different university towns surrounded by rural areas.

Table 3.1: Demographic information and time spent with each informant

	Frank*	Jack	Jimmy	Will	Grant	Matt	Carl
Label	Asperger Syndrome	Asperger Syndrome	Asperger Syndrome	“High-functioning” Autism	Asperger Syndrome	“High-functioning” autism	Asperger Syndrome
Age at and who made initial diagnosis	7.08 years Pediatric Neurologist	4.75 years Pediatric Psychologist	5.11 years Developmental Pediatrician	3.08 years Developmental Pediatrician	9.08 years Pediatric Neurologist	5.67 years Pediatric Neurologist	8.00 years Pediatric Neurologist
Age and Grade at first interview	10.0 years, 4 <sup>th</sup> grade	12.66 years 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	12.91 years 7 <sup>th</sup> grade	13.25 years 7 <sup>th</sup> grade	13.58 years 7 <sup>th</sup> grade	14.16 years 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	14.66 years 8 <sup>th</sup> grade
Time for relationship building	55 minutes	19 minutes + prior relationship	99 minutes	103 minutes	170 minutes	30 minutes	45 minutes
Time spent interviewing boys	315 minutes across 4 interviews	207 minutes across 4 interviews	217 minutes across 4 interviews	245 minutes across 3 interviews	125 minutes across 3 interviews	119 minutes across 3 interviews	139 minutes across 3 interviews
Length of parent(s) interview	69 minutes (Rebecca & Henry)	62 minutes (Amy & Neil)	119 minutes (Emily)	75 minutes (Meredith)	90 minutes (Susan)	85 minutes (Isaac & Louisa)	111 minutes (Rachel)
Length of teacher interview	60 minutes (Ms. Wood)	60 minutes (Ms. Kidd)	40 minutes (Mr. Miller)	67 minutes (Ms. Johns)	40 minutes (Mr. Broder)	40 minutes (Ms. Black)	45 minutes (Ms. Dean)

\*All names were changed to protect confidentiality.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations were noted in the present study. The participants were all Caucasian and from similar backgrounds. It was my intention to have only boys since males outnumber females four to one with diagnoses on the autism spectrum (Volkmar et al., 2004); however, I wanted a more diverse socio-economic, cultural, and/or racial sample, and actively sought participants outside of university towns, including in an urban area. I did not turn any participants away. In addition, I lacked an eleven year-old informant from fifth grade.

I have worked in Virginia for more than 15 years and have provided consultations to educational teams, presented at conferences, and offered workshops. I had previously met three of the boys, though only one remembered me, plus I had met five of the parents. My prior relationships with the boys, however brief, may have helped me develop rapport with them more quickly. Having said that, I was careful that my prior knowledge of some of the boys did not lead me to suppositions about their friendships. I monitored my analysis for bias and endeavored to avoid distortions by asking myself, and the data, if a boy had given me certain information.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection occurred from January-August 2006. I used several data sources during this research: (1) semi-structured interviews with the boys, (2) semi-structured interviews with parents and school-affiliated adults, (3) field notes, and (4) document reviews. The methods provided complementary information that allowed me to interpret the boys' friendship descriptions. Multiple sources provided corroborating data aiding analysis and supporting the credibility of my findings (Snow, 2004).



### *Interviews*

The goal of interviewing is to obtain deep information that can be used in analysis to understand another person's perspective; this often involves repeated contact between researcher and participants (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Patton, 2002; Siedman, 1998). I interviewed each boy three-to-four times to: (1) get a history of his friendships, (2) discuss his perspectives of friendship, and (3) reflect on his descriptions and meanings (Siedman, 1998). In semi-structured interviews some information is desired from all the participants, while other questions are left to the discretion of the interviewer (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). These interviews were guided by a list of questions, based on those used by Carrington et al., (2003) in a similar study (see appendix A for interview questions). They were semi-structured in that, although there was a protocol, the wording and order of the questions was flexible in order to allow me to respond to the informant's answers and emerging ideas (Merriam, 1988).

Before I interviewed the participants I met them and their parent(s) for an initial contact visit. This allowed them the opportunity to meet me before deciding whether they wanted to work with me on this project, and the visit helped me determine whether a good interviewing relationship would develop with each individual (Siedman, 1998). I wanted the boys to feel comfortable with me, so this visit served as an opportunity to build rapport. I explained the process and reassured each preadolescent that there was no single correct answer; I needed them to teach me about friendship.

I knew that the boys might find interviews less appealing than alternative activities (e.g., playing with friends) I scheduled meetings at their convenience and kept them as short as possible, while also trying to get a complete picture (Graue & Walsh,

1998). The majority of interviews were conducted in the boys' homes, but two boys suggested mutually convenient alternative locations. As expected, some of the preadolescents were not familiar with interviewing and it took time for them to feel comfortable with how they wanted to participate. Each semi-structured interview lasted from 30-85 minutes depending on how loquacious the boy was, how frequently we veered off the intended topic, and how long he could persist with an interview (see Table 3.1 for time with each boy). I audio-taped all interviews and transcribed them verbatim.

It can be challenging to interview children (Graue & Walsh, 1998), not to mention interviewing children with an acknowledged difficulty in social situations therefore accommodations were necessary to support the informants during the process. One of the boys needed no particular accommodations in order to complete interviews, but with the remainder I utilized one or more supportive strategies after getting to know them.

Accommodations consisted of: (1) allowing the boy to move, i.e., pacing, changing seats, and leaving the room briefly; (2) the use of “fidgets”—small toys with which a boy could play without losing attention to the process; (3) me waiting silently for two to 40 seconds so an informant could process questions and form responses; (4) accepting some play with the tape recorder (e.g., recording their pets) for brief, comical breaks; (5) invoking “magic” to “conjure” a friend to help activate their imaginations or memories; and (6) visual supports including photographs of the boys and their friends, “off topic” cue cards, easy access to clocks, and questions written on slips of paper that could be disposed of. All of these methods, in addition to our growing relationships, helped the boys to complete the interview process.

### *Additional Sources of Data*

To collect insights into the particular boy's friendships I interviewed each boy's primary caregiver (or both parents when they chose), as well as someone from his school (see Table 3.1). Again I used a semi-structured interview approach based on a protocol (see Appendix B) and what the particular boy told me. Interviews with adults helped to corroborate information provided by the boys. I audio-taped and transcribed verbatim all interviews.

I wrote detailed field notes after each interview within 24 hours. Field notes included the time of day, a description of the setting and the participant, the emotional tone of the interview, difficulties or successes of the process, and my own feelings and impressions (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). These were things that might not be captured on tape or easily transcribed (Emerson et al., 1995). In this way I accumulated a written record of my observations against which other data were analyzed (Emerson et al., 1995).

Finally, educational records provided useful background information, insight into social concerns, and confirmation of the label on the autism spectrum as reported by parents. Records included report cards with teachers' written comments, Individualized Education Plans, physicians' and consultants' reports, and other text documents.

### *Data Analysis*

Interview transcripts were imported into the software program *HyperResearch*<sup>TM</sup> (ResearchWare, 2005), which is designed for qualitative data and assists with the storage, coding, retrieval, and analysis of the text of interviews. The main advantage of the software is that it provides easy access to the data that deals with a particular theme and easy retrieval of text for analysis and illustration; it does not produce connections or

interpretations—that is left to the researcher.

In qualitative research, analysis of data occurs continuously; as data accumulates tentative theories are explored and hypotheses are generated and revised (Anderson, 2004; Becker, 2004). Through this type of analysis the goal is to develop an accurate account of the participants' perceptions (Anderson, 2004). I analyzed data through labeling, developing themes, writing, and participant validation. Below I describe linearly the process I used to analyze the data; analysis was iterative rather than linear and overlapped with data collection.

My first step was reading and rereading the transcripts and bracketing interesting passages that seemed informative or important (Siedman, 1998). When I bracketed I used my own judgment about the significance of particular sections; if I was unsure I erred on the side of including, rather than excluding, text. Next I labeled intriguing passages and used words or phrases provisionally that seemed to describe them, sometimes with words that were within the passages (e.g., “Abe is really funny to me, but some people don’t like him because he can be too irritating...” was labeled “irritating”) and other times in categories that seemed to fit (e.g., “If they can’t agree on the same thing, and it really upsets each other. Then they might think that they just don’t fit with each other anymore” was labeled “stop being friends”) (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Siedman, 1998). I did not have predetermined categories for which I wanted to find examples and eventually had more than 200 different labels applied across all transcripts.

Next I began the process of reducing the text. Using *HyperResearch*<sup>TM</sup> I sorted by labels in order to compare, categorize, and select passages that seemed particularly compelling (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Siedman, 1998). I collapsed some labels for data

that seemed to reflect similar recurring ideas (e.g. “same age,” “older,” and “younger” all related to “friends’ ages”). Significant sections were read through again to determine how each boy described friendships; this allowed me to make tentative thematic inferences from the data (Patton, 2002). For example, the quote above labeled “stop being friends” was categorized tentatively under the theme of “conflict.” The development of themes across cases works well when all participants respond to the same, topic-specific set of questions and is a useful approach when looking at interviews to see how different participants’ reactions compare on the same topic (Patton, 2002; Siedman, 1998).

I kept short written explanations about my emerging insights and tentative themes. These analytical memos also highlighted concerns, clarifications, methodological questions, and links between themes and extant research (Emerson et al., 1995; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Memos facilitated scrutiny of the data and helped me focus as I continued collection.

I further examined the themes with profiles I developed on each boy’s perceptions of friendship, using his own words and writing my transitions and clarifications in his voice while being careful to indicate quotations versus my insertions (Siedman, 1998). My purpose was to attempt to describe friendship from the boys’ perspectives and to give them a voice through my writing (Stoller, 1989). I used these tentative profiles during the final interview with each boy. Either I read it aloud, or asked the boy to read it and discuss with me. In addition to helping me solidify themes and gather further information, the profiles offered the boys an opportunity to reflect on their input and my interpretations. It is important to use caution when writing results to avoid offending or alienating the participants, particularly a group such as mine who are often marginalized

(Brendel, 2003; Oliver, 1992). During interviews the boys shared positive as well as negative stories about themselves; the profiles let them know that some information that I might use in a final paper was less flattering, and gave them the opportunity to renege their words. One boy challenged positive information that his mother had provided, another stated that he was working on improving a negative characteristic that he had earlier described, a third clarified words he had mispronounced or I had misheard when transcribing, and several suggested that “um,” “like,” and other uninformative words be removed. None discounted what I wrote, and all felt I had done a credible job interpreting their words. Writing these within case analyses, followed by further cross-case analysis, helped to inform interpretations and provide exemplars of common themes across participants.

In addition to member checks described above, to monitor for credibility of my interpretations throughout analysis I (1) triangulated the data to check for convergence among my different sources of information (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Weitzman, 2004); (2) reexamined the data to check for examples of my inferences and to determine if there were data that argued against my interpretations (Weitzman, 2004); and (3) shared and discussed my emerging analyses with my advisors and asked them to challenge me to consider alternatives to further focus my research (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Siedman, 1998).

### Findings

All the boys in this study have friends. I first describe their friendships and then, in order to convey friendship from the boys’ perspectives, I present data across three broad themes: (1) Establishing and maintaining friendships, (2) Social reciprocity, and

(3) Conflicts. I present segments of interviews that illustrate the boys' unique descriptions, and supportive information from interviews with parents and teachers. In this way I attempt to provide an insider's perspective of friendship. I make this statement cautiously, since the frame I place around the data is a result of my interpretation of what informants told me. Nevertheless, I believe that the findings offer useful insights.

Jack, Jimmy, Grant, and Carl each named two to three close friends. Their closest friends are their same ages, Caucasian males (with the exception of Carl who has one close Caucasian male friend and another who is Asian). In addition to three good male friends, Jack has one same-age, female friend who, like his male friends, enjoys sports. Grant's friend Marissa lives in his neighborhood and, he says, "She's been my friend ever since I was very, very little."

In contrast to the four boys mentioned above, Frank and Will have a more diverse group of friends. Those Frank calls friends are male and female, primarily Caucasian, but also some of African and Asian descent and within the group there are friends who are younger, older, and the same age as he. The children he interacts with most frequently outside of school are younger—a neighbor Joseph, and Liam who Frank met during an extracurricular activity. At school Frank's friends are his age, although he also counts many of the school staff as friends.

The boys Will describes as his best friends are the same age as he and are Caucasian and Asian. Many of Will's other friends are male and close to his own age, however he also named neighborhood friends who are up to four years older and as much as six years younger. His friends are predominantly male, though he has a few female friends in his neighborhood. He too names some adults at school as friends.

Matt stands out as the only informant who named no close friends unrelated to his family. When I asked Matt to tell me about his friends, he began by describing family friends, “We have our friends, the Thomases, I think that’s their last name. Bailey and Nick and their kids Irena and Silas.” Since it is common for children to develop friendships at school I asked:

Leslie: Who are your friends at school?

Matt: Oh, ah, um, technically, I don’t really have any.

Leslie: No?

Matt: Not really. But, I do know some people...

I projected an expectation that eighth grade boys socialize with peers both inside and outside of school onto Matt. His parents’ opinion is that, “friends for [Matt], are people who we [as a family] collectively know, who treat him nicely...who are friendly to him, are not a threat, and...will mostly not pester him. You know, leave him alone; give him his space” (Isaac, Interview). Even though Matt did not identify close friends, he did provide insight regarding friendship, which is incorporated below along with the descriptions from other informants relative to their friendship experiences.

#### *Establishing and Maintaining Friendships*

All the boys have friends; however, with the exception of Matt, they said making new friends was the most difficult aspect of friendship. The boys described school as their primary place to establish friendships, but also named various extracurricular activities (e.g., chess, baseball, scouts), plus the school bus, their neighborhoods, family friends, church, and vacations as other avenues through which they made friends. The locations where these boys meet new people seem fairly typical; the difficulty in



establishing friendships is unique to each boy, but Frank, Jimmy, Will, and Carl provide examples.

Will moved to a new town during sixth grade. He left a group of good friends he had known most of his life and has made some new friends. When I asked where he finds friends Will said, “Lonely Alley. Just kidding. Well, technically, you see them in classes and stuff.” Later he said, “They’re hard to find.” I asked him to explain why:

Will: They might be a different social status [from] you.

Leslie: What does that mean?

Will: That means that some people are harder to talk to. Just depends how high up they are on the social grapevine. I don’t care where I am; it’s the respect grapevine that I care about...that’s my goal for the school year...[to be] respected...You’ve got to respect me to be my friend.

Will’s difficulty in finding friends may be associated with identifying those who would be respectful without violating the social hierarchy of his middle school. He goes on to describe that he does not typically initiate contact:

Will: Actually, most of the times the other person makes the approach. Like, Leo thought I was cool at the [first day of play practice].

Leslie: But you befriended Gary?

Will: Well, it turns out, that actually on the first and second day of school I had to sit with the, let’s just say not exactly the *best* people, but not exactly the worst either. Well, let’s just say, the iffy people.

Leslie: So that was the first and second day of school?

Will: Yes. Because I couldn't find someone to sit with. At lunch, I had to sit where they assigned me to sit.

Leslie: What happened after the second day?

Will: Well, then we were doing this thing called main society in sixth grade, where we create a main society and do miniature businesses. And so...Gary liked my ideas. Gary was at another table and he heard some of my great ideas, and so, he came over, and he said, I like your ideas, and stuff like that...And then we talked business at lunch.

Leslie: OK, so you sat with him at lunch that next day?

Will: Yeah, and...when it came time to start a business, he was my business partner.

Leslie: So after that how did you get to be better friends?

Will: Well, let's see, I invited him over to my house one day. I taught him how to play Yu-Gi-Oh<sup>®</sup>. Then another day I took him to Duelists' League actually. And I taught him how to play.

Will finds friends by being himself and letting others approach him. In this way he does not violate the "social grapevine" of his school and perhaps finds friends who respect him. Once someone has initiated, Will takes steps to transform an acquaintanceship into a friendship.

Unlike Will, Jimmy, who also moved prior to sixth grade, has a model he uses to identify potential friends.

Leslie: What do you look for in a friend?

Jimmy: Hmm. I look for like, how nice he or she is. And how they get along with me. Getting along, and how they get along with other people. And like what people they hang out with.

Leslie: So what does who they hang out with tell you?

Jimmy: Like, if they hang out with the bullies and stuff. I know that they're probably jerks. Or if they're hanging out with popular kids, they're probably going around and making fun. And telling people that they're better and stuff. And if they're hanging out with the bullies, then they're probably going around threatening people.

Jimmy's observations of his peers offer him a working model from which he might identify potential friends. His perceptions may or may not be accurate (for example, some popular kids may not make fun of other people) nevertheless they are a basis for him to classify his peers and help him identify potential friends. However, when I asked him if it is easy to make friends, he responded:

Jimmy: Not really, no. That's why I don't have that many. [Usually you see] someone you think is cool, and then you try to see if they're cool enough to be your friend.

Leslie: How do you go about seeing if they're cool enough?

Jimmy: Like, seeing if like when they hang out with other people, and when you try to hang out with them, and that type of stuff.

Leslie: So, when do you get an opportunity to hang out?

Jimmy: When I'm in their classes or something.

Leslie: If you thought somebody looked cool, what would be your next step?

Jimmy: Like, say, 'Hey,' and, well, I don't, you don't really go up to them and say anything, like, they might think you're cool sometimes.

Leslie: OK, so you don't go up and go, 'Hey, how's it going?'

Jimmy: No.

Leslie: Do other people do that or is that just not the thing to do when you're in seventh grade?

Jimmy: Some people do that.

Although Jimmy described the steps he could take to meet new people, he acknowledges he does not always initiate contact and, like Will, he waits, hoping others will think he is "cool." Hence if a potential friend does not make that step, a relationship may not evolve.

In contrast to Will and Jimmy Frank is exuberant about the opportunities for friendship afforded by a new school year. He said, "I love also when, there's lots [of] ways to get to know people. They're more cavalry that comes. Like more, kids, that I just like the new school year." I asked him to tell me more:

Leslie: So you were saying that you like a new school year, because there's a new group of kids that you might have in class?

Frank: Yeah. Like, I didn't discover Ruby, which is a new [friend]. My oldest I think of my friends would be Monica. And a lot of my other friends like Rod. Like they're just some of my old friends. But some of my new friends. Billy, Liam, Jeff. And all of those people, like Ruby is so new. It's like incredible.

Later Frank describes how he tries to establish new friendships, "I examine them and think, oh, I should be his friend. Then I should...just like go and say, 'Hey!' ...and make friends." When I asked Frank to describe how he makes friends he answered, "I

talk to them a lot.” Like Jimmy, Frank has a model he uses to identify potential friends:

Frank: I look at them and see if I could be their friend. See if they’re worthy enough to like my stuff as much as them.

Leslie: How do you see if they’re worthy?

Frank: I imagine things in my head...Like in my mind I sense that he might be OK. But the problem is he might get sick of me. And he probably has other friends, probably. So I think, oh, I don’t think so...Because I think he might not like me as much and he might not know...how to say no...But if I say, ‘Hey, are you tired’ to some of my friends and, ‘Shall I give you, shall I leave you alone?’ And sometimes they say, ‘Yes,’ but mainly, ‘No.’

Despite Frank’s enthusiasm about meeting new people he has doubts about whom to approach with friendship. This is similar to Will, but Frank’s reason for his uncertainty is different. I interpret that Frank means he is uncertain if people will be bothered by his talkative nature. He knows that this could be a difficulty and therefore may hang back from some peers in order not to disturb them.

Carl finds it difficult to establish new friendships for reasons that are different from the previous boys. He is concerned about trusting others:

Leslie: Do you find it easy to make friends?

Carl: No, I don’t find it easy at all ‘cause you’ve got to like, closely watch what they’re doing or else they’ll probably exploit you later on...it’s better to just have acquaintances sometimes.

Leslie: How come?

Carl: I don't know. I just don't like people to become more intimate, unless I actually want them to....So in other words, if it's my desire to let them know, or whether I shouldn't let them know.

Leslie: How do you act when you meet someone new?

Carl: Well, I wouldn't talk as much, or I'd still just tolerate them nonetheless. I mean, friendship is basically a form of respect. So, even if they're not your closest friends you've got to show them some respect.

Carl has developed a protective stance regarding new friendships—he is respectful, but watchful, and therefore prefers to have more acquaintances than friends.

*Friends or Acquaintances?*

Particular parents, teachers, and one of the boys suggested that some peers, named by certain boys as friends, may not in fact be friends, rather they simply may be acquaintances. Four of the informants either described themselves or were described as having difficulty in differentiating people who were friends versus not friends (although they all explained the difference between friends and acquaintances). The reasons for this concern include a perception that a boy believes that anyone in his vicinity or who is nice is a friend as well as uncertainty regarding the status of particular relationships. There is evidence to support these concerns, but in some cases viewing the issue from a different perspective provides understanding of how some people, who parents or teachers would not call a friend, could be construed as such. Jack, Frank, and Jimmy exemplify this argument.

Amy's perception is, "If [Jack's] in a group, he just thinks everybody is his friend. He just likes everybody. Everybody is his friend." So I asked:

Leslie: How do you know that someone is your friend?

Jack: (4 seconds) I just recognize them

Leslie: What do you mean you recognize them?

Jack: Like, recognize their Face. Who I know.

Amy may be correct. If Jack is in a group everybody is a friend. Alternatively, it could be Jack gave a literal answer to my question, in other words he recognizes his friends' faces, not necessarily that every face he recognizes is the face of a friend. When asked specifically about classmates, using a photograph of his class, Jack differentiated between those who were friends and those who were not really friends, though he did not explain why.

When I asked Ms. Kidd her opinion of whether certain students were Jack's friends without revealing his preferences, she named the same children Jack named as friends, and the same ones he named as not unkind or disrespectful, but not really his friends. Ms. Kidd particularly described one boy (who Jack named "not really" a friend) who seems less tolerant, "Typically Elliott and Jack do not interact a whole lot. The way I perceive it is that Elliott does not tolerate Jack, so Jack stays out of his way." Rather than believing everyone in his class is a friend to him, Jack seems to perceive other's attitudes and responds by either reciprocating friendship, or staying away from them.

Somewhat similarly Rebecca says, "[Frank's] perception is that sometimes other people are nice to him, so he thinks they're his friends." For example, Frank names some children at school as friends (e.g. Laurence, Monica, and Carrie) but these are children who his parents and teacher would say are either manipulating him or are polite and kind to him, but would not likewise name him as a friend. For example, Ms. Wood was

surprised that Frank named Laurence as a good friend:

Ms. Wood: Now, did he say he's a friend? 'Cause I can't see him as a, OK. This is a boy...that is just kind of, will work the situation, and maybe if Frank had something that he wanted, he would try to be nice to him, just to get it and then...I will say that Laurence sometimes...when we're not watching on the playground...does things to him, that, or he says things to him, that he knows will upset him.

Leslie: Who would he choose to work with if he was needing to choose a group?

Ms. Wood: OK. He would probably choose, those girls, Carrie and Monica. And they've always been real good to him. Umm, who else would he choose? You know, sometimes he chooses Laurence. He'll always go back to him. And I don't know why. I mean he knows that Laurence is going to get him in trouble, but yet he wants to be, I don't know what that relationship is. Laurence will come up and just chat with him sometimes, about "Star Wars." And other kids won't approach [Frank]. So maybe that's why.

It is certainly plausible, as Rebecca suggests, that Frank identifies anyone who is nice as a friend, which, for a ten-year old, may be a somewhat immature view. An alternative view is that Frank may contextualize his friend's behaviors, and sees his friend's positive characteristics (e.g., chatting about one of Frank's favorite subjects), and overlooks negative aspects (e.g., teasing on the playground). In other words, Frank may recognize that you can like a person without always appreciating all of their behavior, which, for a ten-year old, would be a rather mature view.



In contrast to Amy and Rebecca's concerns about their sons, Jimmy himself is uncertain about the status of the relationships he has with some boys at school. He describes not knowing if others he named as friends originally are, in fact, friends any longer. For example, he said Ed was a friend initially, but during our second interview he recants:

Leslie: Now, Ed is from Middleville right?

Jimmy: Yeah, well, he, well, so far we haven't really talked that much.

Leslie: OK, so you haven't gotten together with him?

Jimmy: Yeah, I don't know if he's my friend anymore.

Leslie: Why is that?

Jimmy: I mean we never really hanged out.

Jimmy may have named Ed as a friend at first because Ed was friendly, or because Jimmy was interested in establishing a friendship with him; however, the relationship may not have progressed. Approximately two weeks later Jimmy supplied:

Leslie: Let me ask you then, did you see any of your friends today at school?

Jimmy: Well, you know Ed Brooks?

Leslie: Mm-hmm.

Jimmy: Like the last time, he wasn't really hanging out with [me]. This week and last week, he kind of was.

Leslie: Oh yeah? So what did you guys talk about when you were hanging out?

Jimmy: Well, like what happened in the weekend to you and stuff, and all that.

Right now he has a cast on his arm.

Jimmy may have been correct in thinking that Ed was not a friend anymore—perhaps Ed is inconsistent in his friendship. A second explanation is that Jimmy may not approach potential friends in school as described above, and may take a wait-and-see attitude regarding initiating contact. Mr. Miller provides support for this:

Mr. Miller: He'll hesitate sometimes to participate in [socializing]. If there's a conversation going on, and it's something he wants to talk about, he'll hesitate to kind of step into that circle or whatever...Most of the time the conversation has got to come to him.

Leslie: OK, so if it hasn't circled around him

Mr. Miller: If it hadn't gotten near him, then, then he's not going to participate.

Jimmy's uncertainty regarding who is a friend or not, is relative to his initiating contact. Although parents and teachers are right to be concerned about the quality of boys' friendships, they may need to understand that children's relationships take many forms and involve different styles of interaction.

### *Sharing Interests*

The informants all said that sharing interests and participating in common activities are part of friendship. Four of the boys described shared interests specifically: Jimmy explained that friends, "like stuff that I like a lot;" Will said, "One thing that I like is that if we have the same interests;" Matt, if he were looking for a friend, would want them to "like the same things I like;" and Carl described a friend as "someone who you have common interests with."

In contrast to these explicit statements regarding shared interest, Grant, Frank, and Jack gave implicit descriptions of shared interests. Grant said, "That you really can do a

whole lot of things with” a best friend and described different activities in which he engaged with his friends. Frank described the opposite of shared interests with friends when I asked:

Leslie: Why are some people friends, and other people are not friends?

Frank: Because they don't get along, like, they want to do something, and the other one wants to do the different thing. They just don't want to do the same thing.

By reversing this I interpret Frank to mean that if people share interests in activities then they might be friends. Finally, rather than saying he and his friends share interests, Jack said, “we always do something fun,” and described different activities he engaged in with different friends, e.g., he golfed with one and with another he was more likely to play basketball. In fact all of the boys described a wide variety of activities they engage in with different friends (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Activities in which the boys engage with their friends

Activities	Frank	Jack	Jimmy	Will	Grant	Matt	Carl
Video games	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Watching TV	X	X		X	X	X	X
Going to Movies		X			X	X	X
Going out to eat							X
Jumping on a trampoline	X	X	X	X	X		
Sleepovers and parties	X	X		X	X	X	
Hanging out	X		X		X	X	
Imaginative games	X		X	X	X		
Exploring the internet		X		X	X		
Playing cards				X	X		X
General outside play		X	X	X	X		
Playing ball games	X	X					X
Swimming		X	X				X
Bowling		X		X			
Homework					X	X	X

### *Getting Together with Friends*

The informants see their friends with differing amounts of frequency, although some seemed to share an idealized vision of how often friends socialize. Frank, Jimmy, Will, and Carl said “every day” when I asked in general how often good friends see each other. All may have meant that they saw friends at school but only Carl was specific on this point. Will explained further, “They want to socialize with you. And on the weekends, you try to see them a lot. [It’s] especially good if they live close to you.” During the academic year most of these boys see their friends at school every day, and

some weekends outside of school. Several factors impact the boys getting together with their friends.

*Factors that affect frequency of interactions*

Family schedules encumbered contact with friends for Frank and Jack. “We’ve always said, well let’s wait till Friday or Saturday” therefore Frank sees friends “maybe one or two times a week,” (Rebecca, Interview). Amy also explains that although Jack has two close friends other than Taylor “they rarely get together. We’re busy. We can only do things on the weekends now, and other kids are busy.” When I probed, Amy explained that Jack sees friends “about once a month” outside of school.

As opposed to familial restrictions friends’ availability may impact the amount of time Grant spends with others. Grant sees his best friend Tom or other friends outside of school, “Maybe once every one or two weeks...Maybe more!” (Grant, Interview).

Grant’s slightly defensive response suggests perhaps he would like to see his friends more often. When I asked about best friends he said, “A best friend you don’t feel at all nervous about asking things...like whether you want to come over or not.” This suggests that Grant has experienced some rejection from friends. Grant’s mother provides insight:

Susan: You know, when he was really young, I would arrange to have kids over here as much as I could. A few years ago, he was very frustrated because I was no longer arranging play dates...now Grant does more calling. Unfortunately, he just can’t get someone here all the time. He’s on the phone, and I admire him for being, you know, persistent. But at the same time, I try not to let him be annoying, you know, call too much.

When I asked Jimmy how often best friends see each other he said, “Probably all the time. Some people. Not really me.” Jimmy’s qualification, “not really me” was interesting so I asked how often he would like to get together with a friend outside of school:

Jimmy: Well I’d like to do it once every other week, but we don’t really do that here. Seeing a friend is a rare thing around this house. Well except for my sister. She sees her friends all the time.

Leslie: Why is that do you think?

Jimmy: Just is. With my friends it’s like, you’re going to have to wait for later [to see them]. And with her, it’s like oh you can just see her now. That type of stuff. Well, I don’t really ask my parents, can I go see my friends? Maybe I should do that.

Leslie: So you haven’t really asked for that?

Jimmy: No. ‘Cause sometimes there’s other things on my mind.

Leslie: Like what might be on your mind instead?

Jimmy: Like, being on the computer. Or playing guitar or something. That type of stuff.

Familial constraints and/or other interests (e.g. playing guitar) may impact Jimmy having friends over. However, Jimmy’s failure to ask to see friends may indicate that he does not issue invitations to friends outside of school, similar to his not approaching potential friends in school described above.

Emily confirmed that Jimmy does not invite friends to get together, “Never. Really at this point. This year it’s just been never. We try to encourage him, he used to

[when we lived] in Sibley though.” Jimmy also said, “Like what I’d really like to happen, was to be friends for a long time.” This preference coupled with the information that he has socialized with friends from Sibley a few times since his move and that he used to play with them regularly before his move, suggests that Jimmy feels unsure about issuing invitations to his new friends. Jimmy lacks ready contact with friends whom he is comfortable having over, and he may be, like Grant, somewhat anxious about calling others. Having said that, Jimmy may need time alone, without socializing, as Carl and Frank describe below.

*Needing time alone*

Carl, who sees his two close friends each day at school, explained that otherwise he sees friends “On the occasional weekends.” Rachel’s opinion is that Carl may not want more frequent interaction with friends outside of school, at least during the week:

Rachel: The structure of six and a half hours at school, it’s hard on them. He needs a lot of time to unwind. At night, he wants to be in front of TV...I can see that, really the deep breath [here she raised and lowered her shoulders as if she was releasing stress]. And then he has homework. He has a lot of homework...[and] he’s very comfortable to be by himself. Which of course for us, we’re always thinking, go call somebody. But he’s very comfortable being by himself.

Carl told me that he “rarely” gets together with friends on weekdays but otherwise he did not voice a preference for solitude after school. However, he did say, “If I’m just so angry with someone for just rude remarks or just snottiness, I just want to be by myself

without anyone, just like near me for a certain amount of time.” Solitude may provide Carl a needed break from the demands of socializing inherent to school and family life.

Frank likewise described a need for solitude, “Like, if I could have space alone...Because a lot of people are inviting me over to their house. Liam. Rod. And stuff like that. I just. I don’t have enough time for myself.” Frank may be highlighting a need for some time without social interaction. Similar to Rachel, Rebecca says, “Frank, when he comes home, he withdraws and wants to do the game cube and be left alone. He’s had enough of being around other people. It’s like he holds it together during the day, and then, ‘Leave me alone.’”

Unlike the other boys Matt said, “I usually like being by myself.” He chooses to sit in the back of classes, though his peers do not avoid him. Ms. Black said, “I never see it bother him. Whereas others I do. You know we have other kids that aren’t, are not well liked, or are a little bit different... and, it does, you know. ‘Nobody likes me,’ but I never hear that from him.” Matt said, “I like most people,” and he interacts briefly when the family gets together with friends, but currently he does not seek more interaction than that. This may reflect a personal preference or a need for time alone similar to Frank and Carl.

#### *Transitions and Friendship Stability*

Four of the boys have maintained stable friendships despite school transitions and family moves. Jack, Will, Grant, and Carl have each maintained friendships with one or two close friends for more than three years. Carl has been close to Austin for “six years or so” and Lee “since the beginning of middle school.” Grant and his friend Tom have been close since kindergarten. Having a few classes and eating lunch with his good



friends at school may have facilitated Carl's long friendships. On the other hand, although they attend the same school, Grant and Tom did not see each other in classes or at lunch during seventh grade. Nonetheless, they have maintained their friendship outside of the school context by getting together for sleepovers and to play at each other's house.

Family moves interfered with three informants' friendships during sixth grade, though they have managed to maintain their close relationships. Jack's best friend Taylor moved out of state before sixth grade, Jimmy moved to a new town 30 minutes away at the start of sixth grade, and Will moved several hours east in the middle of sixth grade. They have all attempted to maintain contact with their friends. Jack visited Taylor twice this past year and they call each other about once a month. Will explained that he is closer to his old friends than he is to his new friends, "because I've spent more time of my life with them." Will has seen and talked to his old friends (particularly his best friend Davis) many times in the 18 months since he moved. He frequently stays with Davis's family when he is in town for bi-monthly visits to the doctor, and Will's family reciprocates by inviting Davis for week-long stays during the summer. In addition the two boys talk on the phone "about once or twice a month. Three if we're lucky." Jimmy too left a group of four good friends he had known since first grade and with whom he had interacted both in and out of school. He has spoken with some of his old friends a few times on the phone and has gotten together with one of them once and another twice in the two years since he moved. The frequency of contact may impact the stability of friendships therefore Jimmy's may be less stable than the other boys' relationships.

In this section I presented descriptions from participants related to establishing and maintaining friendships. Although the boys said that it was difficult to make friends,

they all have friends with whom they interact at school or at home. Building from a base of frequent interactions and shared interests, social reciprocity often develops in stable friendships.

### *Social Reciprocity*

Social reciprocity involves give and take on the part of friends. Matt explains that an ideal friend for him would “Probably understand me...[and] he wants me to understand him too,” which indicates an expectation of mutual consideration. The following excerpts from Frank, Grant, and Carl likewise evidence mutuality rather than self-interest in friendship.

From the data, I interpret that Frank is developing an expectation of reciprocity in friendships, although when we began interviewing he described many occasions when he discounted his preference in favor of a friend’s choice. For example, on February 19, 2006 Frank told me about a sleepover at his friend’s house the night before. I then asked him what made him and Liam such good friends:

Frank: Because I be really nice to him. I try my best to be nice. And I do a lot of his things for him. I think I just did his homework at his house too. And he won’t know that, but I think I helped him with his homework...Like I gave him a piggy back...I just do all, everything that he wanted to do.

Leslie: So he made choices and you went along with them?

Frank: Yeah.

Implicit in Frank’s description is a causal explanation for his friendship with Liam: if Frank does whatever Liam wants then they are friends, which indicates Frank may accept nonreciprocal friendships. When I went back for a follow-up interview on June 1, 2006,

Frank described the same sleepover with Liam, but provided a different explanation:

Frank: See I think, it's not that Liam is a bad kid; I think it's just that he was kind of tired and wanted to do it more. And plus, that really disappointed me, because...he wanted to get his way all the time. Because I didn't think he would want to get his way all the time. But. Um. Liam is good, is ok for his age, and for a single child...I'm not saying that he is bad and that he wants all his stuff, and is greedy. He's not greedy. Everyone's greedy. Even George Washington was a little bit greedy.

The above indicates a growing understanding on Frank's part that friendship involves give and take in activities, and an acknowledgement that if Liam wants his way all the time then Frank will be disappointed with this lack of reciprocity. Additionally, Frank again contextualizes a friend's behavior, that is, Liam was tired, younger, and an only child so he may want to do things his own way. Frank excuses Liam's behavior, while still wanting greater mutuality in their friendship.

In contrast, Grant's repeated use of "we" below suggests interrelatedness with his best friend:

Leslie: What do you and Tom do together?

Grant: We jump on the trampoline. We play video games. We pretend to be soldiers. We pretend to be crazy people escaping from mental asylums...We pretend to be zombies. Zombies are funny.

Grant's use of "we" is remarkable in comparison to Frank, Jack, and Jimmy particularly who used the pronouns, "I," "she/he," and "they" when describing activities with friends and friendship. "We" implies two together, while I and she/he/they implies individuals.

This indicates reciprocity, and I interpreted from the excerpt above and other similar stories that Grant and Tom mutually create and enjoy their imaginative games, further suggesting reciprocity.

Carl provides evidence of a developed sense of social reciprocity, incorporating equality and justice in his descriptions:

Leslie: What would you see as not good in a friendship?

Carl: They might try to be a tyrant in a certain sense.

Leslie: What kind of sense?

Carl: It's someone who holds power, who can hold something against you. If you know something about them, and they know something even worse about you.

They can get you, if you basically sang like a canary.

Leslie: Would you say that the friendships that you have, do you hold equal power to each other?

Carl: Yes. It's equal power. If it wasn't, then it's unjust.

Carl's political disposition is palpable in his choice of words and phrases (e.g., "tyrant," "equal power," "unjust"), and indicates a requirement for reciprocity in relationships.

Across the interviews Carl invokes equality, fairness, and justice, connoting mutual benefits. Equality and justice seem essential to him. Ms. Dean describes a need for mutual political understanding in Carl's friendships:

Ms. Dean: I think for Carl to have a good relationship with someone, that person also needs to be concerned with justice and equality. I think that they have to be on the same page. Like I don't think he would ever have a Republican best friend. Or, someone who was ambivalent to what was going on. Like doesn't care.

This study was not designed to gauge developmental changes, but it is interesting to see the disparity between the youngest and oldest participants' reflection of reciprocity. Whereas Frank seems to be developing a sense of mutuality, Carl presents more maturity relative to social reciprocity and friendship.

Furthermore, four of the informants described friends in terms of help with varying indications of reciprocity. As part of his definition of friendship Frank said, "If you're having a rough time, [friends] can help you," while Will said that it is important to have friends, "When you're feeling down. When you're stuck on a level in video games and they've already got past it," and that friends are good for "Helping you out in tight spots." Frank and Will's use of the pronoun "you" seems to imply friends as givers of help, but not necessarily receivers. In other words friends can help you, but it is not apparent in their descriptions that you can also help friends. An alternative interpretation of their use of "you" is that Frank and Will do not see that others might need help and suppose that they alone have problems.

Conversely, Carl talks about giving and receiving help when he says, "Well, they have conflicts with themselves and they need someone to talk to. Like say, when you have a depressing situation, or whenever something negative happens to you that you can't get over for a long period of time." Implicit in Carl's description is that they (friends) need help and you (yourself) need help—indicating a reciprocal relationship.

In contrast, Matt's description of why friendship is important suggests that others need help, but not himself: "Because somebody might need someone to help them in hard times." He defined hard times as "Somebody is having a problem, and he doesn't know what to do." Matt removes himself from this description and invokes only others (i.e.,

somebody, them, someone, he) suggesting others find help important, but Matt may not expect to be the receiver, or perhaps seeker, of such help. This may relate to Matt's preference for time alone, or his explanation that he would ask, "Probably my parents" for help.

As a whole this group of boys suggests that reciprocal friends can provide solutions to problems and emotional support. However, the boys did not say how they might provide or receive help, only that this was a part of friendship. Conflict is likewise a part of close friendships.

### *Conflicts*

Of the boys who described close friends, only Frank and Jack said they do not have disagreements with them, which their parents corroborated. Amy said, "[Jack] just doesn't get mad at people. He takes whatever. His friend Taylor might yell, 'Be quiet!' sometimes, Jack never gets upset with Taylor. He just shrugs it off." If Frank and Jack do not respond to provocative actions or comments they, in effect, negate potential conflicts.

In contrast, four boys described how they maintain friendships in the face of conflicts by either ignoring their friend or the friend's behavior in such situations. Carl, Grant, and Jimmy use time away from their close friends to diffuse disagreements, thereby maintaining the friendships. Carl explains, "It's not good to see each other every day sometimes." These three differ in the amount of time they described as necessary to recover from an argument: Carl said, "You'd basically make up within a couple of days or something." Grant suggested that he and Tom "Maybe in two weeks we'll be perfect friends again," while Jimmy said he would "take a day. Like the next day" to get over a conflict. The boys did not say that they discussed their problems with their friends; rather

they withdrew from their friends and the conflict for a period of time until it was dispersed.

Will is similar to Frank in that he contextualizes some friends' behavior. Even though he described Gary as doing "Very annoying stuff" Will tolerates him "poking me, coloring my hands...and coloring shoes." Will excuses Gary's behavior and says, "But, poking and stuff, sure the ink stays, but guess what? It will eventually fade out." Will acknowledges that some conflicts are relatively minor, while others put the friendship in jeopardy, "If they did something really deplorable and bad...I don't know. It depends on the incident. I can really tell at the time. Like if Gary broke my arm, then I'd stop being friends with him."

Matt, Jimmy, Will, Grant, and Carl identified times when they could not ignore a conflict, forgiveness would be impossible, and the friendship would end. Matt suggested that if "[Friends] can't agree on the same thing, and it really upsets each other. Then they might think that they just don't fit with each other anymore." Will, Carl, and Jimmy all shared stories in which they ended friendships when they realized that a friend was lying to and about them and being manipulative. Jimmy, Carl, and Will shared similar negative experiences that caused them to terminate friendships. Will's story illustrates how friendships can break up if "somebody is lying to you and taking advantage of you, like Ken. Not one of the things that I'm more happy about." He goes on to clarify:

Will: Ken [is] one of my *previous* friends...[I] can't call him a friend now."

Leslie: How come?

Will: Well...one, he's a liar. And he tried to take advantage of us, by making false promises.

Leslie: What sort of false promises?

Will: Well he promised to give me some Yu-Gi-Oh<sup>®</sup> cards for food. And another thing is he cares more about food than his friends. Here's another one of his lies: He said that he was once friends with Brad, and that he just left him...I asked Brad, and Brad is honest...and he said he was never friends with him.

Leslie: Oh.

Will: And here's another one. He also made this lie that Jennifer and I were going out. Oh boy. And I told. There was an error with that story because he said Jennifer told about it. I didn't believe a single word about that...I went to talk to Jennifer, the next morning, because she wasn't there that day. Guess what. She was crying.

Will was clearly upset by this incident as he told me about it each time we met, in great detail. This is the only friendship that Will could recall severing, and he may have felt particularly betrayed. He said, "He's done a pretty good job monkeying it up. Not even signing a full-out confession would even solve it." In other words, Ken has irrevocably damaged their friendship.

In the following excerpt Grant described three different situations that might end a friendship, although he has not experienced them personally:

Grant: Well, like if one friend insulted the other one really badly. And they just hated each other forever after that. Or if they got into a fight.

Leslie: Do you mean, like a disagreement, or do you mean like a physical fight?

Grant: Physical fight I guess. Or, if they, um, (3 seconds) both had the same girlfriend, and got jealous over one another.



Grant portrays the loss of a mutual relationship with the word, “one” as opposed to his previously invoked “we.” His description implies disconnection between friends i.e., each person is one, rather than interrelated. Additionally, he uses other negative relational words: “insulted,” “hated,” and “jealous”—feelings that are not conducive to mutual friendship.

Carl summed up conflicts that end friendships when he explained, “If someone, well, did something you wouldn’t forgive, that’s a friendship you wouldn’t keep and you couldn’t regain. Because a friendship lost often isn’t a friendship regained.”

### Discussion

The present study extends earlier similar research by providing rich descriptions of friendship from seven preadolescent boys with autism spectrum disorders. My findings, obtained through iterative interviews, stand in contrast to those that use single interviews and sociometric devices. Not only does this study contribute to an understanding of the construct of friendship, but of autism spectrum disorders as well. Each of the informants has particular, unique experiences, but their descriptions may help others gain a more general understanding of the essential nature of friendships and autism spectrum disorders.

Specifically the findings indicate that important components of close friendships (i.e., frequent and varied interactions, maintenance over an extended period of time, relative equality, social reciprocity, emotional support, and conflict), which preadolescents in the general population commonly describe, are evident in the descriptions of close friendships of these boys with autism spectrum disorders. This contradicts previous speculation that people with autism spectrum disorders perceive

friendship differently from typically developing preadolescents (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000). No two preadolescents, with or without a label, are exactly the same and we should expect differences in descriptions.

It is particularly noteworthy that five of the informants for the present study enjoy stable friendships that have endured for several years. This contradicts previous research that suggests the friendships of individuals with autism spectrum disorders may be less stable than those of preadolescents without social disabilities (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Carrington et al., 2003; Church et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). As stability increases, friendships generally develop greater reciprocity (Laursen & Hartup, 2002).

Data from five informants uncovered indications of social reciprocity in their descriptions of friendships. This supports similar findings in Molloy and Vasil's (2004) research. In addition, four of my participants described how friends can provide emotional support and solutions to problems, similar to earlier findings (Carrington et al., 2003; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). In the general friendship literature, reciprocity is described as being at the core of friendship (Bagwell et al., 2001; Hartup, 1996; Youniss & Haynie, 1992) and signifies a closer emotional relationship (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). My informants are similar to those found in the general population.

It is significant that in addition to describing conflicts that ended friendships, four boys explained how they had maintained friendships despite conflicts. In the existing literature conflict was not addressed in relation to the friendships of people with autism spectrum disorders. Conflict management is an important indicator of closeness in

friendships, because friends both benefit from their relationship and are free to discontinue any relationships that are perceived to be detrimental (Hartup et al., 1993; Raffaelli, 1997; Shulman & Laursen, 2002). The informants here managed minor conflicts by accepting or excusing disagreeable behavior, or by withdrawing from their friends for a period of time.

Five informants for this study described situations they perceived as intentional and unforgivable (i.e. if a friend lied to, insulted, or manipulated them or if two friends had the same girlfriend resulting in jealousy). Forgiveness is facilitated, but not necessarily guaranteed, by the perception that hurtful acts are unintentional (Asher et al., 1996). When preadolescents manage conflicts with friends or end friendships over conflicts they are learning important social skills (e.g., how to compromise, respect) that manifest in adult relationships (Raffaelli, 1997).

The findings of this study challenge the deficit perspective of autism spectrum disorders in several ways. First, these preadolescents freely entered into an interview relationship and offered evidence of ways they socialize with friends as opposed to the view that people with autism spectrum disorders prefer isolation and avoid social situations (Kanner, 1943). I concede that some of the interviews transpired differently than may be typical because, for example, some boys suddenly left the room briefly or spent several minutes explaining a favorite topic (e.g., sports statistics); however, each time the boy came back to the room or to the topic and continued the interview. Additionally, some of the boys seek solitude after extended periods of socializing; however, this does not signify that they avoid social situations. Second, the majority described their same-age friendships as opposed to failing to develop peer relationships

(American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Third, the findings reveal that four either are developing or have developed social reciprocity with friends; the findings do not reveal a lack of social reciprocity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

### *Future Research*

This investigation provides insight into how a small group of highly verbal, preadolescent boys labeled with autism spectrum disorders describe friendship. Further research with females as well as males, and less verbal and nonverbal preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders is all necessary and will add to the sparse body of literature that just begins to depict how people with autism spectrum disorders understand and experience friendship.

Although the boys described their friendships, this study did not examine the quality of those relationships. The degree to which preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders experience reciprocity, equality, supportiveness, trust, and intimacy in their friendships is a critical area for future investigation. While I believe that interview data can provide a useful point of departure, observation and other ethnographic methods will reveal more about the quality of preadolescents' friendships.

It is essential to investigate how conflict is experienced in the friendships of preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders. Unanswered questions relate to: (1) the frequency of conflicts and who initiates them; (2) the extent to which one or both friends accept responsibility for conflicts; (3) a closer examination of how conflicts are resolved including the degree to which friends assert power, compromise, negotiate conflicts, or withdraw from conflicts; (4) the degree to which third-parties intervene to help resolve conflicts; (5) experiences with winning/losing, equal satisfaction, and/or limited

satisfaction regarding conflict objectives; and (6) how friendships are affected by conflicts (i.e., do they get stronger, weaker, or remain the same).

Although the boys in my study described the frequency with which they saw, or wanted to see, friends, (four of them maintained remarkably stable friendships) this was not a comparative study so I do not know if the boys see their friends with the same frequency as their peers who do not have autism spectrum disorders. One finding that emerged is that some of the boys may seek time alone after an extended period socializing (e.g. after school). Previous researchers have suggested that individuals with autism spectrum disorders may not be as willing to devote significant time to their friendships as typically developing preadolescents and adolescents do (Carrington et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Molloy & Vasil, 2004). A comparison study, incorporating participants with and without autism spectrum disorders, may help us learn about the frequency of interactions with friends and the need for solitude expressed by preadolescents.

Finally, each of these boys has been included in general education settings throughout his school years. Their educational environments may have fostered descriptions of friendship that are more similar to, rather than different from, the general population. Research comparing the friendships of preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders from self-contained and inclusive programs may inform social and educational practice.

### *Conclusion*

Researchers are just beginning to understand how preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders describe friendships. This study provides an important addition to the

extant literature. I present a more thorough description of friendship from the perspective of boys with autism spectrum disorders than previous researchers. In particular, findings of how preadolescents with autism spectrum disorders cope with conflict were not reported in the existing literature. I challenge the deficit perspective of autism spectrum disorders and suggest that further research is needed both to replicate and to extend these findings in order to broaden our knowledge of a diverse range of preadolescents' friendships.

“I don't think that friendship is that easy of a thing to explain. Friendship is not something that needs to be defined. Which means that you are friends with somebody, it has no definition” (Will, Interview). Will is correct; friendship is not easy to define. Nevertheless, my study illustrates the significance of examining the insider's perspective of friendship and, indeed, all social experiences.

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## Appendix A

### *Boys' Interview Questions*

The following seventeen italicized questions should be asked of each participant, though not all in one interview, rather, they will be asked across at least three interviews. Those questions in Roman text may be asked if the participant or interviewer needs information or clarification.

1. *What are your favorite things to do?*
  - Who do you do those things with?
2. *What do you like to do with friends?*
  - Where do you see friends?
  - Where do you like to go with friends?
  - What do you talk about with friends?
  - What sorts of things happen when you are with other people your age?
  - What do you do with other people your age?
3. *Tell me about your friends.*
  - Who are your friends at school?
  - Who are your friends here in the neighborhood or near your home?
  - Who are your friends from other places (e.g., church, the beach, at Grandma's house)?
  - Who comes over to your house?
  - Whose house do you go to?
  - How old are these friends?
  - How are your friends different from each other?

- How are your friends like each other?
  - Pretend I can magically make a new friend appear here today. Tell me what you would want that friend to be like.
4. *Tell me about \_\_\_\_\_(friend's name).*
- What do you like about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What do you not like about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What does \_\_\_\_\_ like to do?
  - Where does \_\_\_\_\_ like to go?
  - When do you see this friend?
  - How often do you see this friend?
  - How often do you talk to this friend on the phone? IM this friend?
  - What do you do with \_\_\_\_\_ (friend's name)?
  - Where do you go with \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What do you and \_\_\_\_\_ talk about?
  - What do you and \_\_\_\_\_ not talk about?
  - Tell me about one day when you were with this friend.
5. *Usually people have some friends they like more than others. Tell me about the friend(s) you like the most.*
- What do you like about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What do you not like about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What does \_\_\_\_\_ like to do?
  - Where does \_\_\_\_\_ like to go?
  - What do you do with \_\_\_\_\_ (friend's name)?

- Where do you go with \_\_\_\_\_?
  - When do you see this friend?
  - How often do you see this friend?
  - How often do you talk to this friend on the phone? IM this friend?
  - What do you and \_\_\_\_\_ talk about?
  - What do you and \_\_\_\_\_ not talk about?
  - Do you tell \_\_\_\_\_ secrets?
6. *Sometimes people say, 'So and so is my best friend.' What do they mean by that?*
- What is a best friend?
  - How is a best friend different from any other friend?
  - What would some do with someone who was a best friend that they wouldn't do with another friend?
  - How often would someone see a best friend?
  - How do best friends act when they are together?
  - Do you have someone you think of as your best friend?
7. *Describe what a good friendship is like. Or Describe a friendship that is going well for you this year.*
- Why is this friendship going well?
  - What is good about this friendship?
  - How would you know if you and another person had a good friendship?
  - How often do you see this friend?
8. *Tell me about a friendship that did not go well for you.*
- How was it not good?

- How was this friendship different from a friendship that went well?
  - What was wrong with in this friendship?
  - How did you act in this friendship?
  - How did the friend act?
  - Are you and this person still friends?
  - If not, why not? If so, why?
  - How often do you see this friend?
  - How would you know if you and another person had a good friendship?
9. *Sometimes people who are friends get mad at each other. Tell me about a time when you were mad at a friend.*
- What were you mad about?
  - How did you tell your friend you were mad? Or How did your friend know you were mad?
  - What happened while you were mad at your friend?
  - Tell me about when you weren't mad at your friend anymore.
  - What happened so that you weren't mad anymore?
  - Are you and this friend still friends?
10. *Tell me about a time when a friend was mad at you or Pretend \_\_\_\_\_ was mad at you about something and tell me about that.*
- What was your friend mad about?
  - How did you know your friend was mad?
  - What happened when your friend was mad at you?
  - Tell me about when your friend wasn't mad anymore.

- What happened so that he wasn't mad anymore?
- How could you tell your friend wasn't mad anymore?
- Are you and this person still friends?

*11. You just started a new school year. How have your friends changed?*

- Are some people who were your friends last school year no longer your friends this year?
- Sometimes at the beginning of a new school year people make new friends. Who are your new friends?
- Do you like to do the same things this year with friends that you did last year?
- If so, what are those things? If not, what do you like to do now that you didn't like to do last year?
- Do your friends like to do the same things this year as they did last year?
- If so, what are those things? If not, what do they like to do now that they didn't do last year?
- Do your friends from last year act any differently this year?
- How has the new school year been good for friendships?
- How has the new school year been bad for friendships?
- What has been good about your friendships this school year?
- What has been bad about your friendships this school year?

*12. What things would you like to keep the same with your friendships?*

- What things work well in your friendships?
- What things are nice about your friendships?
- What things are enjoyable about your friendships?

- What things are important about your friendships?
- What sorts of things are easy in your friendships?
- How is it easy to be a friend?
- When is it easy to be a friend?
- When is it easy to get along with friends?
- Sometimes things with friends go well. Tell me about these things.
- Tell me about things that work with people who are your friends.

13. *What things would you like to change about your friendships?*

- What things do not work well in your friendships?
- What things are not good about your friendships?
- What things are unenjoyable about your friendships?
- What things are unimportant about your friendships?
- How is it hard to be a friend?
- When is it hard to be a friend?
- When is it hard to get along with friends?
- Sometimes things with friends do not go so well. Tell me about these things.
- Tell me about things that didn't work with people who are no longer your friends.

14. *Suppose you had a secret that you wanted to tell someone, but you didn't want to tell your mom or dad. Who would you tell? (I'm not asking you to tell me your secrets.)*  
*or Most people have things they don't talk about with very many people.. Usually they talk to someone about those things. Who do you talk to about stuff like that?*

- Why would you tell that person?
- How would that person act if you told him/her a secret?

- Does that person tell you his/her secrets?

15. *Why do people have friendships?*

- What are friendships about?
- What are friendships not about?
- What are friendships good for?
- What are friendships not good for?
- When are friendships good to have?
- When are friendships not good to have?
- Would you want any more friends than you have now? Why or Why not?
- Try to give me a definition of friendship.

16. *Tell me about people who are not your friends.*

- How are people who are not friends different from people who are friends?
- How are people who are not friends the same as people who are friends?
- What bothers you about some people?
- Describe a person who you would not choose as a friend.
- How would someone you would not want to be friends with act?
- Why are some people friends, and other people are not friends?

17. *If using photos or an artifact that indicates a particular person ask:*

- Is this a friend of yours?
- Tell me about this person.
- What do you/did you like to do with this person?
- What were you and this person doing when this picture was taken?
- In addition, use other questions from above.



## Appendix B

*Adults' Interview Questions*

1. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships.
2. How often does \_\_\_\_\_ get together with friends?
3. How does \_\_\_\_\_ act with friends?
4. What does \_\_\_\_\_ do with friends?
5. Who does \_\_\_\_\_ choose to work or play with? Would you describe these people as friends?
6. What does \_\_\_\_\_ say to you about friendship?
7. What does \_\_\_\_\_ ask you about friendship?
8. In your opinion, what does \_\_\_\_\_ understand about friendship?
9. In your opinion, what does \_\_\_\_\_ not understand about friendship?
10. How are \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships the same as other children's friendships (i.e., your other children or other children in your class)?
11. How are \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships different from other children's friendships (i.e., your other children or other children in your class)?

## Appendix C

### *Research Study in Need of Participants*

Title of Project: The Perceptions of Friendship by Preadolescents who Carry a Label of Asperger Syndrome

Investigators: Leslie S. Daniel, and Bonnie Billingsley (faculty advisor)

Purpose: The goal of my research is to provide a comprehensive picture of how preadolescents with Asperger syndrome perceive friendship.

Participants: There are four parameters for participation in the study:

1. Participants will be preadolescent/adolescent boys.
2. Participants will be 10-14 years old.
3. Participants must carry a primary label of Asperger syndrome which was applied either by a medical or educational team.
4. A boy may have a secondary label of speech/language impairment or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but should not have a co-morbid medical diagnosis of other mental health issues (e.g. obsessive compulsive disorder) or other primary disability (e.g. Fragile X syndrome).

About the Primary Investigator: My name is Leslie Daniel. I am a full-time doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction through Virginia Tech's School of Education. Prior to becoming a full-time student I worked for the Training and Technical Assistant Center at Virginia Tech for 10 years. There I provided assistance to educational teams supporting students with complex disabilities, particularly autism and Asperger syndrome. Before that I was a special educator in Montgomery County, Virginia and St. Mary's County, Maryland.

Procedures: If your son meets the parameters and is selected to consider participating in the study I will:

1. Provide you with a Parent Permission Form, which further describes the study and requests permission for your son to participate. You will also receive a copy of potential interview questions at this time.
2. I will provide your son a Child Assent Form to request his involvement.
3. If both you and your son agree to participate in the study, I would like the opportunity to meet him, with you present, so that he and I can get to know each other. I believe that it is important to establish a relationship before embarking on a research path together.
4. I would conduct at least three, and not more than five, one-to-one interviews with your son, to explore his perceptions of friendship. These interviews are anticipated to last approximately 45 minutes, though I will adjust this to your son's needs.
5. I would conduct at least one interview with you, his parent(s), particularly his primary caregiver, regarding your insight into how your son understands friendship. This will last approximately one hour.
6. I would conduct at least one interview with at least one of your son's teachers regarding his or her insights into your son's friendships. This will last approximately one hour.
7. I would like to audiotape all of the above interviews
8. I would review relevant documents, particularly educational records that may provide useful information regarding social relationships. Educational records will also serve to confirm the label of Asperger syndrome.

**Confidentiality:** To preserve confidentiality of what your son tells me, all identifying information (real names, references to specific schools, family names, and so forth) will be removed from observation notes and interview transcripts. The interviews will not be shared with administrators or others associated with your son's school.

**Risks:** The risks should be no more than minimal. It is unlikely that any reader will be able to associate a quoted passage with your son. Publication of this work is unlikely to occur before 2007.

**Benefits:** In a thorough search of the literature I was able to find only one, rather poor study that specifically researched how individuals with Asperger syndrome perceive friendship, yet establishing friendships is often a gauge of appropriate social skills. I would like to address this gap in the literature. I cannot promise any benefits to you or your son personally. However, it is my hope that through this study your son will understand more about his friendships.

If you are interested in learning more about the study and if your son is 10-14 years old, and carries a label of Asperger syndrome, please contact me, Leslie Daniel at 540-953-3852 or [lsd@vt.edu](mailto:lsd@vt.edu).

Contacting me for more information does not mean that you are giving permission for your son to participate in the study. Nor will there be any expectation that you will allow your son to participate simply because you asked for additional information.

Thank you for considering this research project.

## Appendix D

### *Parental Permission Form*

Title of Project: The Perceptions of Friendship by Preadolescents who Carry a Label of Asperger Syndrome

Investigators: Leslie Daniel, and Bonnie Billingsley (Committee Chair)

Purpose: The goal of my research is to provide a comprehensive picture of how preadolescents with Asperger syndrome perceive friendship.

Procedures: If you agree to allow your son to participate I would first like the opportunity to meet him, with you present, so that he and I can get to know each other. I would like him to feel comfortable with me before we begin to discuss his perceptions of friendship. This may also help him decide whether or not he wants to work with me on this project. In my experience some children with Asperger syndrome may be more comfortable entering a relationship after they have had some time to observe me. If your son prefers to sit back and watch while I talk to you, this is acceptable. Though this contact meeting could be informative to the study, I will not probe regarding friendships; the primary purpose will be to build a relationship.

I will use several types of data collection during this research, for which I would like your permission. These are:

1. Conducting at least three, and not more than five, one-to-one, semi-structured and photo elicited interviews with your son, which I would like to tape record. The interviews will allow me to glean a history of your son's friendships, discuss his perspectives of friendship, and reflect on my interpretations of his perspectives.

Visual props can be helpful when interviewing children; photo-elicited interviews use

pictures to support conversation. If you have photo collections (in albums, shoe boxes, etc.) that include your son with others I would like to look through them and use selected pictures to help stimulate discussion with your son. Other artifacts, such as letters, cards, drawings, etc., may also serve this purpose.

I anticipate that each interview will last approximately 45 minutes, but this will be adjusted to match your son's needs and preferences. Interviews will be conducted at a location in which your son is comfortable, and we can be relatively undisturbed (e.g., your home, a private room at the public library, or other). You may sit in on these interviews if you choose. Also, if your child requests that you sit in, I will ask that you do.

In semi-structured interviews, there are questions that guide the interview (providing structure), but if the interviewee mentions something related to the topic, that is not directly addressed through a question then the interviewer may follow his lead and pursue further information. In this way the interview is flexible (or semi-structured). I have 17 main questions I want to ask (across interviews, not all at once) with between one and twelve probing questions under each in case it is difficult for your son to answer a particular question. The probing questions will not necessarily be asked. Additionally, your son may mention something about friendship that I want to follow up with another question. The 17 main questions are:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a. What are your favorite things to do? | c. Tell me about your friends.         |
| b. What do you like to do with friends? | d. Tell me about _____(friend's name). |

- e. Usually people have some friends they like more than others. Tell me about the friend(s) you like the most.
- f. Sometimes people say, 'So and so is my best friend.' What do they mean by that?
- g. Describe what a good friendship is like. or Describe a friendship that is going well for you this year.
- h. Tell me about a friendship that did not go well for you.
- i. Sometimes people who are friends get mad at each other. Tell me about a time when you were mad at a friend.
- j. Tell me about a time when a friend) was mad at you or Pretend \_\_\_\_\_ was mad at you about something and tell me about that.
- k. You just started a new school year. How have your friends changed?
- l. What things would you like to keep the same with your friendships?
- m. What things would you like to change about your friendships?
- n. Suppose you had a secret that you wanted to tell someone, but you didn't want to tell your mom or dad. Who would you tell? (I'm not asking you to tell me your secrets.) or Most people have things they don't talk about with very many people.. Usually they talk to someone about those things. Who do you talk to about stuff like that?
- o. Why do people have friendships?
- p. Tell me about people who are not your friends.
- q. If using photos or an artifact that indicates a particular person ask:
  - Is this a friend of yours?
  - Tell me about this person.
  - What do you/did you like to do with this person?
  - What were you and this person doing when this picture was taken?
  - In addition, I might use other questions from above.

2. Conducting at least one, semi-structured interview with you, his parent(s) (particularly his primary caregiver) regarding your insights into your son's friendships. I would like to audiotape these interviews. These interviews would be based on what I learned from your son, but could also include:
  - a. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships.
  - b. How often does \_\_\_\_\_ get together with friends?
  - c. How does \_\_\_\_\_ act with friends?
  - d. What does \_\_\_\_\_ do with friends?
  - e. Who does \_\_\_\_\_ choose to work or play with? Would you describe these people as friends?
  - f. What does \_\_\_\_\_ say to you about friendship?
  - g. What does \_\_\_\_\_ ask you about friendship?
  - h. In your opinion, what does \_\_\_\_\_ understand about friendship?
  - i. In your opinion, what does \_\_\_\_\_ not understand about friendship?
  - j. How are \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships the same as other children's friendships (i.e., your other children or other children in your class)?
  - k. How are \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships different from other children's friendships (i.e., your other children or other children in your class)?
3. Conducting at least one, semi-structured interview with at least one of your son's teachers regarding his or her insights into your son's friendships I would like to audiotape these interviews. (The interview questions would be the same as for you as a parent above);
4. Taking notes during and based on all of the interviews. These notes will describe



what is going on in front of me during interviews—things that might not be captured on tape or easily transcribed. Notes might include the time of day, a description of the setting, the emotional tone of the interview, difficulties or successes of the process, and my own feelings and impressions.

5. Reviewing relevant documents, particularly educational records including report cards, teachers' written comments, Individualized Education Plans (IEP) or 504 plans, reports and other text documents that may provide useful information regarding social relationships. Educational records will also serve to confirm the label of Asperger syndrome. Personal artifacts such as notes from friends, birthday party invitations, journal entries, calendars, and photo albums may provide insight into your son's friendships, but will be viewed only with his express permission.

**Confidentiality:** To preserve confidentiality of what your son tells me, all identifying information (real names, references to specific schools, family names, and so forth) will be removed from observation notes and interview transcripts. The interviews will not be shared with administrators or others associated with your son's school. I may, however, share them with members of my doctoral committee at Virginia Tech so that they can assist me in analysis. These people will not know your or your son's names. At other times, the interviews will be kept in my possession or in a locked location.

Work related to this research will be completed on my personal laptop computer, which is password protected and cannot be activated by anyone other than myself. My computer is kept in my possession or in my home office. Audiotapes and transcripts of interviews, and notes taken during observations will be erased/destroyed upon completion of the research.

Bear in mind, however, there are relatively few children with the label of Asperger syndrome and that there is a small possibility that if my work is published a year or two from now some local reader may guess the identity of your child in spite of the use of pseudonyms. I think the risk of this is small.

Risks: The risks should be no more than minimal; however, given that social situations can be difficult for people with Asperger syndrome there is the potential that discussing friendships, and particularly problems in friendships, could cause some distress. If your son seems to be getting upset I will try to rephrase the question, redirect the interview to another topic and try a similar question at another time, offer that we take a short break before resuming the interview, or discontinue the interview for the day. The flexibility in the interview schedule will allow me to watch for tension, and not press should the interview seem to be causing distress.

You may have chosen not to discuss the label of Asperger syndrome with your son. If this is so, I will not bring it up in my interviews with him. Likewise, disability label will not be disclosed to other participants or their families. It is unlikely that any reader will be able to associate a quoted passage with your son. Publication of this work is unlikely to occur before 2007.

It is possible that your son could reveal negative information or that I might intrude on something intensely personal.

- Romantic relationships are often initiated during preadolescence; I will explain to your son that I am not researching romantic relationships and that if I am asked questions regarding intimacy or sexual concerns I will respectfully refer him back to you, his parent(s).

- Likewise, if your son describes a particularly dangerous event or activity (e.g., playing with guns at a friend's house) I will explain my need to alert you, his parent(s), and will ensure that you are informed of these circumstances.
- In the unlikely event that your son reports that one of his friends is conducting illegal activities I will explain to him that I must discuss the situation with you, his parent(s). I will describe what I learned to you and will allow you privacy or remain with you (based on your preference) to discuss the issue with your son. Given my promise to maintain confidentiality I would not contact the other person's parents, but would offer to support you in a conversation with other parents if you ask that I do so.
- If your son provides information during interviews or casual conversation that indicate physical or sexual abuse or suicidal tendencies, I am obligated to dispense with confidentiality and report the concern to the appropriate authorities.

I would understand if your son would want to opt out of the study if I had to speak to you about a concern; however, I would welcome his continued participation.

Benefits: Your son will be assisting in creating a comprehensive picture of how preadolescents with Asperger syndrome perceive friendship, an area that is lacking in published research. However, I cannot promise any benefits to you or your son personally. It is my hope that through this study your son will understand more about his friendships. In addition, as a token of appreciation, I will give your son a small thank you gift that complements his interests (e.g., a small Lego set or a gift certificate to a local movie theater).

Freedom to Withdraw: There is no penalty if you do not want your son to participate.

This will not affect any relationship we currently have, or may have in the future, or his

treatment at school. This project has no connection with any public or private K-12 school. If you decide to give me permission today, and then decide later that you want to take it back and not participate, just let me know.

I will also be asking your son to give his assent for this research, and if he does not wish to participate it will not go forward (for your information, I have attached the assent form that I will review with your son if you agree to let him participate). Also, I will make it clear to him that if he wishes to withdraw or becomes uncomfortable at any point, he need only tell me.

If you have any questions prior to signing, have concerns anytime during the duration of the study, or wish to withdraw consent my phone number is 540-953-3852. My email is [lsd@vt.edu](mailto:lsd@vt.edu). If for any reason you are uncomfortable speaking with me you can talk to the chair of my doctoral committee: Dr. Bonnie Billingsley at 540-231-8335 or [bbilling@vt.edu](mailto:bbilling@vt.edu), or to the chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, David M. Moore at 540-231-4991 or email at [moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu).

If you agree to let your son participate in this research project, please sign below and date the form. I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name Date

Please print the name of your son: \_\_\_\_\_

Does your son know that he carries a label of Asperger syndrome? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, may I use the label of Asperger syndrome, if pertinent, during our interviews? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

*Child Assent Form*

Title of Project: The Perceptions of Friendship by Preadolescents Boys

Investigators (Investigators are people who are studying something): Leslie Daniel,  
Bonnie Billingsley

Purpose (Why I want to do a study)

I'm a student at Virginia Tech, and I have to write a research dissertation (which is a really long paper). My research is about how boys like you, who are 10-14 years old, understand friendship.

Procedures (What we will do if you are part of the study)

If you agree to help me with my research I first want us to meet each other and spend no more than an hour together with you and your mom, dad or another adult you live with. During this time I might talk with your parents, meet your pets, or you might want to ask me questions.. This is so you and I can be a little more comfortable around each other. If after you get to know me a little bit, you still want to help, then:

1. I would like to talk to you at least three times (and not more than five times) about your favorite things to do, what you like to do with other kids your age, what you think makes a good friend, and other things about friendships. I don't want to talk about romantic stuff like going out with (dating) someone. If you want to talk about dating I'll remind you to talk to your parents because they can help you with that. Each interview will last about 45 minutes, but they could be shorter or maybe a little longer. I would like to tape record us talking during these interviews. Your mom or dad may choose to sit in and listen while I'm talking with you. You may ask your

parents to sit in on these interviews if you want to.

We would be talking about friends and friendships. Here are the sorts of things I would ask you about:

- Your favorite things to do.
- What you like to do with friends.
- Who your friends are.
- What a ‘best friend’ is.
- What a good friend is.
- Why you might not be friends with someone anymore.
- Being mad at a friend, or a friend being mad at you.
- What you like and don’t like in a friendship—why some people are friends and others are not.
- Why people want friends.
- Sharing secrets with friends.
- We might look at photographs of you and talk about who you were with or what you were doing when the picture was taken. I would like to interview at least one of your parents and at least one of your teachers about your friendships. I will ask these grown ups about you and your friendships. I will also tape record these interviews.

2. During all of the interviews I will take notes. These notes will describe what is going on during the interviews, like what time it is, where we are when we are talking, how the interview seems to be going (like if we talk a lot, or if we have a problem), and

my own feelings and impressions.

3. The final thing I want to do is to look at school records like your old report cards.

You might also have things like notes or pictures from friends or other things that could help me understand friendship for boys your age. If you are willing to share pictures, cards and things like that, I would like to look at items that have to do with your friends.

Confidentiality (That means keeping things secret)

In order to keep secret everything that you tell me, we will choose a fake name for you, your family and friends, and change the name of your school and other places you mention.

I won't tell your principal, teachers, or other adults at school anything you tell me. I won't tell your parents anything you tell me either, except if you tell me something that is dangerous—then I would have to talk with your parents about that.

I may, however, share some things with professors at my university who are helping me do this research. These people will not know your name and will agree to keep anything I share a secret. I'll keep the interviews, tapes, and notes that I write at my house in a locked box (except when I am reading them). Audio-tapes and notes about interviews will be erased/destroyed once I am done with this research.

Risks (This means could there be any problems for you if you help me in my study)

There are next to no risks of you helping me. One thing that we would worry about is if someone could tell who you are by reading something I write about the study. It is not very likely that anyone could tell I was writing about you. Though I'll be doing this research this fall, I won't finish all the work I have to do to figure things out before next

summer at the earliest. I might get something I write about this study printed in a teacher magazine, but that wouldn't happen until 2007 or later.

We will be talking about when you have fun with friends and also about when you might have been mad at a friend. If it is hard for you to talk about something we can try a few things:

- I might ask a question in a different way to see if it is easier to answer.
- I might change the subject and we can talk about something else regarding friendship and then try again another time with a particular question.
- We might take a short break from the interview to get a drink, rest for a few minutes, or something else.
- We might decide we've talked long enough for one day, and we'll stop for the day.

It is possible that you might tell me about something dangerous or even illegal. If so I would need to talk with your parents about any concerns. These might be:

- If you describe a particularly dangerous event or activity (like playing with guns at a friend's house or something else that could cause you or someone else to get hurt) I will need to talk to your parent(s).
- If you tell me that one of your friends is doing something illegal (like smoking marijuana or stealing from 7-11) I must tell your parent(s). You can be with me when I talk to your parents, or I can do it alone that is up to you. If your parents would like me to be with them while they talk to you, then I will stay. Given my promise to keep your name a secret I would not contact the other person's parents, but I would help your parents if they asked me to.



- If you tell me something at any time that makes me think you (or a friend) are being physically or sexually abused or that you are thinking of suicide, I am obligated to report the concern to the appropriate authorities, and would have to give your name.

I would understand that if I had to speak to your parents about a concern you might not want to work with me anymore on this study; however, I would welcome your continued help.

Benefits (This means how can working on this with me, help you)

I cannot promise that your working on this study with me will help you at all. However, it might help you understand about friends a little better. In addition, once we are finished with all the interviews, as a thank you, I will give you a small gift that I hope you will like (this might be a small Lego set or a gift certificate to a local movie theater, or something else).

Freedom to Withdraw (This means you can quit if you don't want to do it anymore)

You don't have to help me with this study. Nothing is going to happen if you don't want to work with me. No one will know about it other than you, your parents, and me. If you do decide to work with me, and then you change your mind, all you have to do is tell me. It will be OK.

If you ever want to talk with me or ask me questions about my project, my phone number is 540-953-3852. My email is [lsd@vt.edu](mailto:lsd@vt.edu). If for some reason you do not want to talk to me, you can tell or talk to one of my teachers: Dr. Bonnie Billingsley at 540-231-8335 or [bbilling@vt.edu](mailto:bbilling@vt.edu). You can also talk to the person in charge of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, David M. Moore at 540-231-4991 or email at

[moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu). I've told your parents all of this too, so you can tell them and they can call one of us for you if you want.

#### Questions

Does this make sense? You can ask me anything you like about this, and you can also talk to your parents. You don't have to decide today if you want to help me or not.

If you agree to work with me, please sign below and date the form. I have an extra copy of this form for you to keep.

---

Name

---

Date

## Appendix F

*Adult Interview Consent Form*

Title of Project: The Perceptions of Friendship by Preadolescents who Carry a Label of Asperger Syndrome

Investigators: Leslie Daniel, and Bonnie Billingsley (Committee Chair)

Purpose: The goal of my research is to provide a comprehensive picture of how preadolescents with Asperger syndrome perceive friendship.

Procedures: I am interviewing several boys regarding their friends and what they understand about friendship. With the boy's permission I would like to interview you to get your perspective of his friendships. There is no expectation of your participation or consent to interview even though permission has been given to interview a particular boy. If you choose to participate in this interview, you will help corroborate information provided by the particular boy. All interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed and will last approximately one hour.

These interviews will be semi-structured in that I have a framework of interview questions; however, what I have learned from a particular boy will guide the questions with you. Potential questions include:

- a. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships.
- b. How often does \_\_\_\_\_ get together with friends?
- c. How does \_\_\_\_\_ act with friends?
- d. What does \_\_\_\_\_ do with friends?
- e. Who does \_\_\_\_\_ choose to work or play with? Would you describe these people as friends?

- f. What does \_\_\_\_\_ say to you about friendship?
- g. What does \_\_\_\_\_ ask you about friendship?
- h. In your opinion, what does \_\_\_\_\_ understand about friendship?
- i. In your opinion, what does \_\_\_\_\_ not understand about friendship?
- j. How are \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships the same as other children's friendships (i.e., your other children or other children in your class)?
- K. How are \_\_\_\_\_'s friendships different from other children's friendships (i.e., your other children or other children in your class)?

To preserve confidentiality of what you tell me, all identifying information (real names, references to specific schools, and so forth) will be removed from notes and interview transcripts. The interview will not be shared with the boy or his family, school administrators or others associated with the boy. I may, however, share them with members of my doctoral committee at Virginia Tech so that they can assist me in analysis. These people will not know your name or the particular boy's name. At other times, the interviews will be kept in my possession or in a locked location. Audiotapes, transcripts of interviews and notes will be erased/destroyed upon completion of the research.

Risks: The risks should be no more than minimal. It is unlikely that any reader will be able to associate a quoted passage with you or a particular boy. No publication of this work is likely to occur before 2007.

Benefits: I cannot promise any benefits to you personally. However, you will be assisting in creating a comprehensive picture of how preadolescents with Asperger syndrome perceive friendship, an area that is lacking in published research.

Freedom to Withdraw: There is no penalty if you do not wish to participate. If you decide to give me permission today, and then decide later that you want to take it back and not participate, just let me know

If you have any questions prior to signing, have concerns anytime during the duration of the study, or wish to withdraw consent my phone number is 540-953-3852. My email is [lsd@vt.edu](mailto:lsd@vt.edu). If for any reason you are uncomfortable speaking with me you can talk to the Chair of my doctoral committee: Dr. Bonnie Billingsley at 540-231-8335 or [bbilling@vt.edu](mailto:bbilling@vt.edu) or to the chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, David M. Moore at 540-231-4991 or email at [moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu).

If you agree to allow me to interview you as part of my research, please sign below and date the form. I have an extra copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please print your name \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

*Parent Consent to Review School Records*

Leslie S. Daniel, doctoral student at Virginia Tech in the School of Education, has my permission to review the school records of my child, \_\_\_\_\_, for purposes of confirming his label of Asperger syndrome and for information that may be pertinent to her study entitled 'The Perceptions of Friendship by Preadolescents who Carry a Label of Asperger Syndrome.' Such records may include, but may not be limited to: his past and current IEP, 504 plans, report cards, eligibility reports, and other information maintained in school records.

---

Signature of Parent or Guardian

Date

---

Please print name

## Appendix H

### *Guidelines for Submission*

*Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*

Submission Manuscript Guidelines:

*Submission change of address*

From 2006 please submit your manuscripts to:

Vicky Ellam, City University, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, Email:

V.Ellam@city.ac.uk

Office: 020 7040 4577/4578.

Authors from the Americas, please continue to send your submissions to:

Mohammed Ghaziuddin

Division of Child Psychiatry L5007

University of Michigan Medical Center

1500 East Medical Center Drive

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-0277, USA

Fax: +1 [734] 615 9003

E-mail: mghaziud@umich.edu

1. The aim of the journal is to publish original research or original contributions to the existing literature on autism. Papers should not previously have been published or be under consideration elsewhere.
2. Each paper submitted will be refereed by at least two anonymous referees.
3. *Length of papers.* The number of high quality submissions to the Journal has increased significantly over the last year and in order to facilitate more rapid

publication of important papers it has become necessary to limit the size of manuscripts accepted. The maximum text length, therefore, should be 5000 words and the total length of the manuscript should not exceed 20 pages (double-size, 12 font, including figures and references etc.). In exceptional circumstances we may be able to accept manuscripts that exceed this length, but this should be discussed with one of the editors before submission.

4. When submitting papers for consideration, please supply *four* paper copies. If the paper is accepted for publication, then a copy of the final version will be required on disk. *The author is responsible for guaranteeing that the final hard copy and diskette versions of the manuscript are identical.*
5. In order to protect the identity of clients or participants, authors should use pseudonyms and remove any information leading to identification of any of the individuals described in the study.
6. The Editors welcome contributions to the Letters to the Editors section of the journal. In the interests of saving space, or to protect confidentiality, for example, the Editors may edit letters for publication.
7. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned to authors if rejected.
8. *Blind peer review.* Authors should provide two title pages, one containing names, affiliations, full mailing address plus telephone, fax, email address, and one containing the title only.
9. Please number all pages except the title pages, in the following order: abstract (100-150 words), keywords (up to five), address for correspondence; main text; appendices; acknowledgements; notes; references; tables; figure captions; figures.



Each of the above sections should start on a fresh page.

10. Articles submitted for publication must be typed (or word processed) in double spacing *throughout (especially all notes and references)*, on one side only of white A4 or US standard paper, with generous left- and right-hand margins but without justification. Pages should *not* be stapled. Titles and section headings should be clear and brief with a maximum of three orders of heading.
11. *Quotations*. Lengthy quotations (exceeding 40 words) should be displayed and indented in the text.
12. American or UK spelling may be used, to the author's preference. Indicate italics by underlining and use single quotation marks. Dates should be in the form '9 May 1995'. Delete points from 'USA' and other such abbreviations.
13. *Tables and figures* should have short, descriptive titles, and be clearly numbered. All footnotes to tables and their source(s) should be typed below the tables. Column headings should clearly define the data presented. Camera-ready artwork must be supplied for all figures. The location of tables and figures in the text should be given by a note 'Table/Figure X about here' on a separate line in the text.
14. *References in the text* should be presented in the Harvard system, i.e. the author's name and year of publication in brackets, together with the page number, e.g. 'As Hobson (1989, pp. 22&BAD:ndash;3) has observed...', or, in a more general reference:  
  
'Scott (1985) appears to be saying that...'.
15. *Reference list*. The references should be listed alphabetically in full at the end of the paper, typed double-spaced for ease of editing, in the following style:

Happe, F. (1995) *Autism: An Introduction to Psychological Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hobson, R.P. (1989) 'Beyond Cognition: A Theory of Autism', in G. Dawson (ed.) *Autism: Nature, Diagnosis and Treatment*, pp. 22-8. New York: Guilford.

Sigman, M.D., Kasari, C., Kwon, J. & Yirmiya, N. (1992) 'Responses to the Negative Emotions of Others by Autistic, Mentally Retarded and Normal Children', *Child Development* 63(3): 796-807.

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