



# South Tyneside Council

T.M.E. (Talking Meeting Eating) Group  
Consultation Project 05

Special Friends Scheme

Children's Services Service  
Development Team

## **Introduction**

This short report sets out the results of a small consultation project carried out with the members of the TME group. The TME group is a reference group for young people who are disabled.

The consultation was around the "Special Friends" and "Active Care" schemes that are contracted by South Tyneside Children with Disabilities Team for some of the young people that they work with.

The consultation took place in June 05.

## **Background**

The South Tyneside TME group has been meeting regularly since Nov 04 and they have looked at a number of issues in that time, including; what being disabled is like, what kind of support young people need, how to attract more members and helping the engagement officer complete consultation with other young people at the STAN event.

We have also been on a trip to the bowling alley in South Shields.

The group is made up of 4-5 young people but we are hoping to encourage more to attend now that the core group is established.

We have been meeting up at the Open Zone - this is South Tyneside's learning and enterprise centre. This venue was carefully chosen for its good access, late opening and the fact that it has nothing to do with traditional "disability services".

## **Project Brief**

The group was asked to look in detail at the Special Friends and Active care schemes and think about how useful these services were, did they feel they were "right for them", how could they be improved and was there anything better? The sessions took the form of guided conversations, direct questions, brain showers, and case studies.

## **Results**

Firstly the group was asked if they had heard of Special friends or Active Care. Once the projects had been described it was clear that the

young people did know about the schemes and all had experience of them in some way. It was noted that some had more experience than others.

The young people were asked for words that they associated with the schemes and what did the schemes remind them of. These were then "showered" onto a flip chart. This exercise was to familiarise themselves with the schemes and let them know that any answer is allowed.

The list they came up with was as follows:

- Helpers
- Carers
- Nice
- Good looking
- Support
- Support staff
- Handlers
- Helpful
- Handles with care
- Useful
- Keep out of the house
- Visits

Then they were asked what they thought the purpose of the schemes were, i.e. why did they have a special friend?

- to help you to learn how to cope on your own
- get more fresh air
- to get out of the way of your parent's/mam
- to see what it's like in the real world, world of work, outside of where you live
- to give you a push in life
- to give you a booster
- to give people a break
- to get you out places
- to have some fun

The young people were then given a list of words which were taken from the Special Friends website which supposedly described the scheme. The young people were asked to comment on these words and say if they agreed or disagreed with the comments.

**Making Friends-**

The young people agreed that making friends with the "special friend" was possible but unlikely. This didn't mean that the person was "unfriendly" but they wouldn't regard them as a friend due to their age and the fact that they didn't have much in common. *It would be possible to make friends with other young people if they were taken in groups or to where groups meet.*

**Safe-**

The young people agreed that they always felt safe with the carer but they did note that they rarely felt unsafe anyway.

**Enjoy-**

The young people said that they often enjoyed the **company** (of the special friend) and the **activity**. *But they would have more fun with other young people.*

**Support-**

They agreed that there was support for bad behaviour and help to give you more confidence.

**Short Breaks-**

The group described short breaks as "time away for families" and "time away from families".

**Extended Families-**

The group did not agree that the schemes were like extended families - they were not related to the carers and in fact were strangers when they first met.

In the next session the young people began to explore the scheme in more detail. As facilitators we felt that the young people were telling us what people had told them about the scheme and not what they really believed.

We also felt that it might be difficult for some people in the group to express any negative feelings about the scheme. Traditionally many young disabled service users find it hard to express negative or mixed feelings about services that they receive due to the pressures of feeling "grateful". We felt it was necessary to "give the group permission" to say exactly what they felt even if this was negative.

In order to do this we set up a photo story case study about a disabled young person who has a "special friend". We explained the case study to the young people and they were able to explore their own feelings about special friends through the experiences of "Jenny" the girl in the photo story.

We felt this was a very effective tool in encouraging the young people to give a true account of their feelings and experiences.

### **Case study**

**"Jenny has been a wheelchair user all her life. She is now 10 years old.**

**About six months ago her mam and dad asked Jenny's social worker if they could have some help to look after Jenny on a weekend, so that they could take Jenny's little sister to the swimming baths.**

**Jenny now gets a visit from John, her "Special Friend", every Saturday morning.**

**They often go to the library as Jenny loves to read books."**

The young people were then asked,  
*"How do you think Jenny might feel about her special friend?"*

### **Response**

Jenny might want to be around her parents more.

She might want to be with her sister.

Jenny might want to go out with her parent's alone rather than them taking her sister.

Jenny may feel not wanted.

Jenny might feel happy to get out of her mam's way but doesn't really want to be with a special carer.

She might miss her wider family - can they not take her out? E.g. aunties

Could Jenny's grandparents not take out the baby?

Could Jenny's special friend look after her in the evening?

Jenny could feel not loved as parents spend more time with the baby.

She might feel that they aren't paying enough attention to her.

### **Case study**

**"It's now been six months since she started seeing John. Jenny is now quite upset that she never gets to go swimming on a Saturday."**

#### *Question*

*"Who do you think Jenny should tell?"*

If Jenny feels homesick she should tell her special friend.

She should tell another friend NOT her special friend.

Jenny should tell her parents.

Jenny should not tell her parents in case they are upset.

Jenny should tell her social worker that she doesn't want a special friend.

#### *Question*

*"Do you think it is ok for Jenny to not want a special friend?"*

Does she know it's okay to not want a special friend?

It is ok but people might want you to keep going.

What if Jenny wants to stop but her mam wants her to go?

#### *Question*

*"What could Jenny's family do instead?"*

Jenny could go once a month instead.

Jenny could go once every six months.

The carer could take Jenny's sister instead.

The carer could take Jenny and her sister then she still gets to spend time with her.

The carer could be a young person so that she had more in common.

The carer could take her out with other young people in the group.

The carer could go swimming with the family to be an extra help.

*Question*

*Can you think of a new way to run the scheme?*

There should be more things to do for people of my own age.

We could go to clubs rather than just on our own. Suggestions for clubs included:

- After school clubs
- Youth clubs
- TME type groups
- Activity groups
- Computer clubs

*(The young people indicated that they would like to go to mixed groups rather than ones specifically for disabled children.)*

The carers should come with ideas for things to do rather than depending on me for ideas - I don't know anywhere good to go to.

The children could use their MAX cards.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from their responses that the young people had a lot to say about the "Special Friends" and "Active Care" schemes. But it is important to note that the TME group is a small group and cannot hope to represent the whole disabled children population. At the same time the young people did express a clear view about the above schemes and these should be noted and built upon. In this report we have endeavoured to set out as accurately as possible what the young people have said - but we have not attempted to analyse the results or suggest how the ideas can be incorporated into the plans of the CWD Commissioning Group.