

“I Need Friends for My Autism... But I Don't  
Know Why”: An Exploration of Autistic  
Children's Friendship Experiences

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## Abstract

Autistic children can experience challenges in making and maintaining friendships, and middle childhood (ages 6-12) may be a particularly challenging time for children, as social networks become more complex. However, a large proportion of research into these experiences is based on adult reports, observations, or focuses on the experiences of adolescents and adults, meaning that the voices of younger children are absent from the literature.

This doctoral project aims to fill this gap by directly investigating the experiences of autistic children in the United Kingdom. The project involves three studies which explore friendship experiences from multiple perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. These studies include a systematic review exploring the experiences of autistic children across primary settings in the UK; a multiple perspectives study including autistic children in Key Stage 2 and their key adults which uses novel, creative methods and remote, parent-led interviews; and a parental perspectives study investigating the impact COVID-19 and school transitions have on children's friendships.

Results from the studies show that autistic children can and do have successful friendships, but that these friendships may differ from those of non-autistic peers. Autistic children were found to show a preference for children that had similar needs to themselves, and clear gender and age differences were identified, with girls reporting more pressure to make friends and conform to social norms. Importantly, the studies highlighted that there were key differences between the experiences of autistic children and the perceptions of key adults in their lives. This has implications for the design of support and highlights the need to speak with children about areas that concern themselves. The project also highlights the lack of research including children directly and calls for more inclusive methods to be implemented to combat this.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AAC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication
ASC	Autism Spectrum Condition
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme



DSM-V	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
EHCP	Education Health Care Plan
GOALS	GenOmics And Life Stories
OS	Open Science
OSF	Open Science Framework
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
ToM	Theory of Mind
UK	United Kingdom

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## Authors Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references. Chapter 7 of this thesis has been published and can be accessed via the following reference:

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Autistic children can experience challenges in making and maintaining friendships that do not apply to most neurotypical children. They may also experience friendships differently from their peers and want different things from them. It is important to understand these experiences to be able to build a neurodiversity affirming environment that can support autistic children to manage and enjoy their social relationships outside the family.

This chapter serves as an introduction to this doctoral thesis. Firstly, the background and research context of the study are discussed, followed by an introduction to what is currently known about autism and children's friendships. The ways in which school settings play a role in support for autistic children and their peer relationships are then presented. A case is made for why the direct experiences of autistic children should be explored further, alongside the use of multiple perspectives, such as those of parents

and teachers. Finally, the main aims of the project are described, and I conclude the chapter by detailing the structure of the thesis.

## **1.1 Context of the Study**

Friendships can be defined as a mutual relationship between two or more individuals and play a large role in children's (and adults') lives (APA, 2022). Friendships have been shown to provide a source of support as children navigate their social worlds and act as a protective factor against challenges that may negatively impact their well-being, such as bullying (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018). However, evidence suggests that autistic children may face challenges when making and maintaining friendships (Cresswell et al., 2019; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2016), suggesting that they may be at heightened risk of loneliness and poorer mental well-being (Black et al., 2022).

Several studies have shown that, for autistic children, both friendship quantity and friendship quality are generally lower than among their neurotypical peers (Bauminger-Zviely et al., 2014; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010), and that attending mainstream education further impacts these experiences. Those attending mainstream school have reported higher levels of peer difficulties and bullying compared to their autistic peers in special school (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015), and being surrounded by neurotypical social norms has been found to have negative implications for identity development (Mesa & Hamilton, 2022b). With this in mind, children attending special schools will likely have differing experiences of friendship compared to their autistic peers in mainstream settings, which has implications for support, and is an area that requires further exploration.

Although research into autistic children's friendship exists, the current literature base is predominantly quantitative, reporting on friendship characteristics which are measurable, such as number of friends, peer nominations, or frequency of interactions (Kasari et al., 2011; Petrina et al., 2014), or studies have focused on the perspective of parents and teachers (e.g., (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Bauminger-Zviely et al., 2014; Rowley et al., 2012)). Whilst quantitative and adult report studies are important in helping us to understand autistic children's friendships, qualitative studies with children can

build upon these findings to gain an in-depth picture of how autistic children themselves may feel about these challenges by ensuring that their voices are included in the research. Therefore, the current research set out to better understand the first-hand accounts of autistic children using creative, inclusive methods.

## **1.2 Autistic Children and Their Friendships**

Autism is a lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition affecting around 1 in 100 people (Zeidan et al., 2022), and is often characterised by deficits in social communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (APA, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. As a result, autistic individuals may face challenges in developing and maintaining social relationships, such as friendships, and many will have differing communication preferences from their neurotypical and non-autistic peers. These may include a preference for alternative non-verbal communication or a more direct communication style. As autistic children's approaches to social communication are often different from those of their non-autistic peers, there is often a mutual misunderstanding leading to difficulties with social interactions (Milton, 2012). These challenges often impact upon children's friendships (Mendelson et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2021), which may have implications for their well-being and future outcomes.

Friendships play a large role in children's development, providing a space in which to practice and learn fundamental prosocial behaviours such as companionship, care, and empathy. During middle childhood, (6-12 years) friendships tend to develop in their complexity. Friendships move away from being predominantly based on companionship and playmate activities, to experiences of intimacy through sharing feelings and experiences with peers, with children often relying on these friendships for emotional support (Bauminger et al., 2008; Brownell & Brown, 1992; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). As friendships shift from play activities to more emotional and complex social interactions, many autistic children are reported to find making and maintaining friendships more challenging (Cook et al., 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> The diagnostic criteria and specific terminology surrounding autism will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

As a result of children's different social preferences and the challenges they face with making and maintaining friendships, it could be assumed that many autistic children do not have the same desire for friendships as their neurotypical peers. However, existing literature suggests that autistic children do desire friendships, with some research highlighting their ability to experience and enjoy stable friendships (Bauminger et al., 2008; Daniel & Billingsley, 2010). Furthermore, studies show that the friendships some autistic children desire are not aligned with the neurotypical definition of friendships (Calder et al., 2013), which may further impact on their ability to make and maintain friends. Therefore, more research is needed into the experiences of autistic children to explore what their definitions and wants concerning friendships are, so that they can be best supported. This is especially important in primary-aged children when the move from shared playmate activities to more complex intimate relationships are developing.

### **1.2.1 Gender Differences**

Recent studies have highlighted gender differences in autistic children's friendships, with girls reporting more relational and overall conflict compared to autistic boys and non-autistic peers (Sedgewick et al., 2019). However, research into the experiences of autistic girls is scarce. This gender imbalance in the literature is not surprising given the prevalence of males diagnosed with autism (Loomes et al., 2017). Nonetheless, gender differences in neurotypical friendships are well established, suggesting that there will likely be gender differences in autistic children's friendships, highlighting the need for more exploration in this area. Furthermore, very little research investigates gender differences in the experiences of younger children, with recent work focussing on the experiences of adolescents (Halsall et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019), a gap this research aims to fill.

### **1.3 The Role of Different School Settings**

As of January 2023, 32.2% of pupils with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) in the UK have autism listed as their primary need, making it the most common type of need for school children in the UK (DfE, 2023). Children with an EHCP are legally entitled to

support and have the option of attending either a mainstream or special school/base, however, over 70% of autistic children are educated in a mainstream setting (DfE, 2023). It is worth noting that although many autistic children do access support, many do not have an EHCP in place. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus was on children with an EHCP due to them being entitled to attend mainstream and specialised settings. This decision is discussed in Chapter 4.

Although attending a mainstream setting may be beneficial and enabling for some autistic children, studies suggest that the experience of attending mainstream school may be complex. For example, a recent systematic review highlighted the negative impact mainstream schooling had on autistic adolescents' relationships, with many studies reporting that young people had no close friends at school (Horgan et al., 2023). The study also found that relationships with teaching staff was challenging as a result of their poor understanding of children's needs. One reason for these added challenges may be a result of mainstream staff having less special educational needs training than their colleagues in special schools. Therefore, the support they can provide to autistic children may not be as tailored, resulting in an area of further challenges for children which may be amplified in inclusive settings, such as mainstream schools.

Research has also found that children have a preference for friendships with peers who are similar to themselves (McPherson et al., 2001). As children in mainstream school may find themselves predominantly surrounded by neurotypical peers, this may have implications for their friendship development. Autistic children attending special schools may have more opportunities to be around peers who have similar needs and are therefore more understanding of their differences. However, this may also present its own challenges, with children likely having more complex needs and social communication difficulties which could further impact negatively on friendship development. Research into this area, especially in middle childhood, is scarce, and more investigation is needed to further understand the impact of differing school settings on autistic children's friendships. Furthermore, inclusive education and school settings are



complex issues, with considerable resistance emerging from political, cultural, and social structures in society. The debates surrounding this will be further explored in Chapter 2.

#### **1.4 Children's Voices and the Inclusion of Multiple Perspectives**

Research into the friendship experiences of autistic children has predominantly relied on reports from key adults in their lives. Focussing on adult perspectives only, without the inclusion of children's voices, may result in a fragmented understanding of this phenomenon. It is therefore important to include autistic children in research that concerns them.

The limited research on autistic children's experiences from their own points of view may be a result of the perceived challenges associated with working with children who have differing social communication skills (Ellis, 2017). Traditional qualitative methods often rely on the use of oral language and the need for children to recall and present their personal experiences in ways that may not be preferential to them. Therefore, as researchers, it is important to consider these differences when designing studies to ensure that they incorporate alternative means of communication if we are to successfully include children's voices. One way in which this can be done is through the use of more creative methods. Drawing has been found to offer a non-verbal mode of expression for children (Dockett & Perry, 2005), and places the child in the position of being the expert (Leitch, 2008). This may reduce the feeling of a power imbalance which is often present in traditional methods and may give children the flexibility to share their thoughts in a medium they are already familiar with. Furthermore, drawings and non-verbal data have been used successfully with children with social communication difficulties as a springboard for further discussions (Hambly, 2014). By using a range of alternative data collection methods, autistic children may be able to better access research and express their own opinions on areas of importance to them, such as their friendships.

Although children's experiences must be at the forefront when researching personal phenomena such as friendships, the opinions and insights key adults can provide are still vital for a clearer picture of understanding these experiences. Adults, especially parents and school staff, play a large role in advocating for, and providing support to,

autistic children. Therefore, including their perceptions of experiences may be useful when planning and implementing support. Furthermore, as adults usually implement support plans, it is important to understand whether their perceptions of children's friendships differ from those of the children themselves. If adults have differing perceptions of the needs and wants of children, this may negatively impact the choices they make when providing support to autistic children. By including autistic children in research, we will be able to better understand their experiences of friendships and, combined with adult perspectives, use these experiences to guide policy and support. Therefore, this research gathered data from multiple perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of children's friendships whilst using creative and alternative methods of data collection to support children's engagement with the study.

### **1.5 Main Project Aims**

This doctoral project explores the friendship experiences of autistic primary-aged children across the United Kingdom. The studies within this project investigate how children themselves experience friendships by using creative methods, alongside including the perceptions of key adults in their lives (parents and school staff), allowing the research to explore any differing perspectives. Therefore, the main aims of this project are:

- To learn about the friendship experiences of autistic children from multiple perspectives to identify any key areas of strengths or challenges.
- To include the voices of autistic children throughout to ensure that their experiences are at the forefront of future intervention and support design.

This research project has three parts. Study One (Chapter 3) is a systematic literature review, including a thematic synthesis of the main foci of this project, i.e. the friendship experiences of primary-aged autistic children (4-11 years) in the UK and whether those experiences differ between school settings. Study Two is a multiple-perspective study which involves primary data collection from children, their parents, and school staff. This

part of the project is reported across Chapters 4-6. The third study in this thesis is a parental perspectives paper exploring the impact of school transition on autistic children's friendships during COVID-19 (Chapter 7). This chapter is presented as a paper which has been published. The findings of all three studies are discussed in Chapter 8.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the current literature related to autistic children and their friendship experiences. Firstly, it discusses what autism is and provides an overview and critique of relevant theories. It then goes on to discuss how being autistic may impact individuals' lives, exploring schooling, support needs, and gender differences. The development of friendship across middle childhood and the impact autism may have on friendship development and maintenance are then discussed. The chapter concludes

by discussing the current support offered to autistic children in relation to their friendships and peer relationships.

## **2.2 What is Autism?**

Autism is a complex, lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterised by a range of social communication deficits, repetitive behaviours, and restricted interests (APA, 2013). Autistic children often experience challenges that can impact upon their experiences at school as a result of these social communication differences, and many have co-occurring diagnoses of physical or developmental conditions, such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or learning disabilities (Matson & Goldin, 2013). Given the wide range of differences autistic individuals can experience, it is likely that each child has a unique profile of strengths and challenges that can change and develop over time. This has important implications when supporting and designing support for autistic children both at home and at school as each child may benefit from tailored or individualised support.

Diagnosis of autism is possible from early childhood, with the average age of diagnosis being 43 months (van't Hof et al., 2021). However, multiple factors such as gender and language ability can impact access to diagnosis meaning for some, diagnosis will occur once they have begun attending school or, in some cases, into adult life. Therefore, it is likely that some autistic children in school may be undiagnosed and may find it difficult to access the support that they need. In the academic year of 2022-2023, there were 206,763 autistic children and young people in UK schools receiving support, with 56% of these students having an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (DfE, 2023). EHCPs give students a statutory entitlement to specialist support provision and provide children and young people with the option of attending a specialist school for those children with more complex needs. However, policy guidance from the UK Department for Education advises that, where possible, autistic children should be educated in mainstream schools (DfE, 2015), and most autistic children in the UK are now being educated in mainstream settings (National Autistic Society, 2021). This promotion of inclusion has been thought to be beneficial to many autistic children, with

studies showing that attending mainstream preschool settings provides opportunities for longer periods of social interaction with peers (Whitaker, 2004), and an increase in social and communication skills (Stahmer & Ingersoll, 2004). However, this is not the case for all children, with some autistic children reporting difficulties in mainstream education including the challenges of accessing support and higher rates of bullying and social exclusion (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Therefore, it is likely that autistic children in mainstream schools have differing experiences from their peers in special educational settings given the different opportunities for engaging with peers that may be present and the differing support on offer from school staff.

### **2.2.1 Theories of Autism**

Various theories have been proposed to help understand the underlying mechanisms of autism, some of which are particularly relevant when thinking about friendship development, social interactions, and the support we provide to autistic individuals. Two key theories that aim to explain the social challenges autistic children face will be discussed here: Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, 2000), and the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012).

#### *2.2.1.1 Theory of Mind*

One early cognitive theory that aimed to provide insight into the social difficulties experienced by autistic individuals was the Theory of Mind model (ToM). Theory of Mind describes the ability to recognise and interpret the beliefs and intentions of others. It is a broad and complex construct that aids individuals with attributing mental states, such as desires, to oneself and others, making it possible for individuals to explain and predict behaviours (Rosello et al., 2020). The ToM model suggests that the differences in empathetic perspective-taking contribute to the difficulties some autistic individuals face in social interactions (Baron-Cohen, 2000).

It has been suggested that neurotypical individuals intuitively attribute mental states to others as a way to understand social interactions (Bretherton et al., 1981). However, autistic individuals may have differing abilities in this area which suggests that

some autistic children may find it challenging to understand that another person's behaviour may be motivated by a belief or intention that differs from their own (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). Therefore, ToM differences are believed, by some, to contribute to the social communication challenges faced by autistic people which may have implications for understanding why some children struggle with friendship development and maintenance (Zhou et al., 2019). The theory suggests that difficulties in understanding others' perspectives can lead to misinterpretations of social cues and struggles in engaging in reciprocal conversations, areas that are often key in forming and maintaining friendships. Studies have found that when general language ability and sociometric status were controlled for, neurotypical pre-schoolers with at least one mutual friend scored higher on ToM tests than their peers who had no friends, suggesting a link between the two (Peterson & Siegal, 2002). Similarly, in the autistic community, being able to pass ToM tests, and therefore being perceived to have higher levels of ToM skills, has been linked with an increased ability to make friends (Astington & Jenkins, 1995), and engaging in ToM training was found to increase social interactions (Feng et al., 2008) which may in turn increase the opportunities to make friends. Furthermore, being able to anticipate others' behaviours is seen to be essential for navigating social life in a predominantly neurotypical world (Zhou et al., 2019). Teacher reports of peer interaction skills have been found to have a significant correlation with the scores obtained on false belief tasks by autistic children (Peterson et al., 2007) and lower ToM skills reduced children's ability to display 'socially appropriate behaviours' (Mazza et al., 2017).

However, not all research has found positive links between ToM ability in autistic individuals and their ability to engage in social situations. Multiple studies have failed to find a relationship between ToM and adaptive social functioning (Bennett et al., 2013; Fombonne et al., 1994; Frith, 1994). Peterson et al. (2016) identified that ToM was not the variable that most directly predicted peer social skills, instead language ability was found to be more important. This may suggest that autistic children with better language ability may find social interaction easier to navigate which has implications for school settings and the areas that may be targeted by support. The discrepancy in findings also shows the

heterogeneous abilities of autistic individuals, highlighting the need for more tailored support.

Given the influence the ToM model of autism has had on research and the use of the model in teaching and training others about autism, it is important to take the theory into consideration. However, many criticisms have been made about the theory, and it could be suggested that the expectation that autistic individuals must act in narrowly defined, normative ways to show empathy and care may be damaging to them. Furthermore, the theory heavily focuses on deficits and impairments, terms which are not in line with the neurodiversity movement (see section 2.3.1 for an overview of the neurodiversity movement) and implies that the autistic community agree that learning to apply ToM skills to 'fit in' in a largely non-autistic society is desirable. Instead, framing patterns of differences that present strengths and barriers in relation to social norms may be more useful.

It is also important to note that the differences in Theory of Mind ability are not consistent across all autistic people. Just as autism has a very heterogeneous range of characteristics, performance on aspects of ToM tasks varies also, with some individuals showing strengths in specific aspects of ToM and some facing challenges in other areas (Grossman et al., 2000). For example, research has found that autistic individuals without intellectual disabilities often perform better on explicit Theory of Mind tasks, such as the false belief task (Senju, 2013), with more recent research showing that autistic adolescents score similarly to neurotypical peers even on complex explicit ToM tasks (Barendse et al., 2018). However, when assessed on implicit tasks which require spontaneous knowledge, such as facial emotion perception, performance is much lower (Schaller & Rauh, 2017). Some autistic people have even expressed being able to solve some explicit ToM tasks as a result of experience and general problem-solving skills (Frith et al., 1991), an ability which was found to be more common amongst those with higher language ability (Frith, 1994). This may suggest that some autistic children are able to pass explicit ToM assessments, but does not necessarily mean they can apply these skills to real-life

situations that often require more automatic and quicker responses to social cues (Livingston & Happe, 2017; Senju, 2012).

Additionally, the extent to which this challenge is present may change with age and developmental progress. Recent studies have shown that some autistic individuals that do have challenges with ToM and 'mind reading' overcome these difficulties with time (Steele et al., 2003). It is likely that for some, these challenges are overcome using coping mechanisms that they have developed. Therefore, understanding whether autistic children do have challenges with ToM has implications for support, as allowing older autistic individuals who have overcome these challenges may be able to teach these skills to others as a way of supporting social communication, and in turn friendships.

The Theory of Mind hypothesis has significantly influenced our understanding of autism and has guided research into the cognitive foundations of the condition. It has provided a good basis for researchers to understand the challenges some autistic children may face with play, social interaction, and verbal and non-verbal communication. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is not the only explanation for the challenges faced by autistic individuals in social interactions. Other theories and perspectives, such as the 'double empathy problem' offer alternative ways of understanding the complexities of the social challenges autistic individuals face.

### *2.2.1.2 Double Empathy Problem*

The 'double empathy problem' is a concept that highlights the reciprocal nature of communication difficulties and empathy challenges between autistic individuals and their non-autistic peers (Milton, 2012). It proposes that misunderstandings and breakdowns in social interactions occur not just because of the differences in autistic individuals' social skills, but due to the challenges neurotypical individuals might face in understanding and adapting to the communication styles of autistic people, therefore moving the sole responsibility away from autistic individuals (Milton, 2012).

Traditionally, empathy has been understood from a neurotypical perspective, focusing on the ability to accurately perceive and understand the emotions and intentions of others. However, Milton suggests that individuals with different cognitive profiles,



such as autistic children, often have unique communication styles and cues that are not readily understood by others, impacting on this ability (Milton, 2012). For example, responding to others' emotions 'incorrectly' may mean that some autistic people are seen as lacking in empathy, however, it may be that their response is simply different from the societal norms and expectations, as opposed to being a direct link to lack of empathy (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020). These different responses may be less common for neurotypical individuals, leading to a misunderstanding by non-autistic peers. For example, studies have shown that neurotypical individuals commonly misinterpret the mental states of autistic individuals, leading to confusing social interactions and negative experiences (Sheppard et al., 2016). These challenges will likely impact autistic children's ability to engage in social situations and may even result in some avoiding social interactions which in turn may negatively affect their ability to make and maintain friendships. The double empathy problem challenges the idea that overcoming social communication difficulties is solely the responsibility of autistic people. It proposes the need for both parties to make efforts to overcome communication challenges, aligning more closely with the neurodiversity movement, which emphasises the need to understand and value diverse cognitive profiles rather than framing one as inherently better than the other.

The theory also suggests that successful interactions partly depend on two individuals sharing similar experiences of ways of being in the world. As autistic children and neurotypical children likely have very different experiences, especially in relation to the way they choose to communicate, and their preferences for certain social situations, it is likely that a lack of shared understanding may negatively impact on their interactions. For example, autistic adults report that they have experienced misunderstanding across their lifetime (Camus et al., 2022). It could therefore be suggested that autistic children may find interactions and friendship development easier with other autistic children, as their shared experiences will impact their experiences of social worlds, likely as a result of having different expectations or preferences for, social interactions, such as friendships (Finke, 2023).

Overall, the double empathy problem highlights the importance of non-autistic individuals also adapting their communication and empathy to help facilitate meaningful interactions between autistic individuals and neurotypical individuals. It has implications for promoting inclusive communication strategies and fostering more genuine connections between individuals. This could be extremely important when thinking about friendship development and maintenance and has implications for support and intervention design, especially for school-aged children attending mainstream settings, who may face greater challenges as a result of being around more neurotypical peers.

### *2.2.1.3 Theoretical Framework for this Thesis*

It is worth noting, that whilst theories help to offer structure and definitions, given the heterogeneity of autism, the narrow and often finite dimensions of theories are likely too restrictive, and this must be taken into consideration when discussing theories of autism. Both theories, ToM, and the double empathy problem, have key implications for understanding the challenges autistic children may face when developing and maintaining friendships. The theories both propose that language and being able to understand others' emotional states play key roles in explaining why some autistic children may find social situations, and in turn friendships, difficult. However, the ToM model implies that the onus is on autistic individuals to make changes in the way that they behave in social situations, implying that difficulties and differences they may have with Theory of Mind abilities are a problem and something which should be changed or overcome. Although studies do confirm that some autistic children have differences in ToM ability, I do not view this as something that is a problem and believe ToM abilities are something which should be supported as opposed to being changed. Therefore, the work within this thesis aligns more closely with the double empathy problem but recognises that differences in ToM abilities may impact upon children's social interactions.

## 2.3 Autistic Movements and Language Use

### 2.3.1 Neurodiversity Movement

The neurodiversity movement recognises and supports diversity in the human population, challenging the medical model (see section 2.3.2) and conventional notions of ‘normality’ by reframing how we understand conditions, such as autism. Neurodiversity as a movement arose as a response to the perceived marginalization of autistic people, and aimed to celebrate autism as a key part of a person’s identity, challenging those who were focused on finding a cause and a cure for it (Bagatell, 2010; Ortega, 2009). The movement defines neurodevelopmental conditions as natural variations that occur in the population, rather than deficits or disorders, and aims to shift the narrative from ‘fixing individuals’ to celebrating their unique strengths (Kapp et al., 2013).

Given that the movement is driven by differences as opposed to deficits, those in support of the neurodiversity movement often oppose interventions aimed at ‘fixing’ autistic individuals, focussing more on those that address the attitudes and environmental barriers that prevent autistic people from living successful and happy lives (Leadbitter et al., 2021). In doing so, interventions developed within a neurodiversity framework often provide guidance around coping strategies and autonomy as opposed to those that aim to change autistic children’s behaviours to fit with neurotypical norms. This moves away from more traditional forms of support, such as the teaching of ToM skills and focuses more on changing people’s environment than changing people’s behaviours. A larger discussion surrounding current support and intervention can be found in section 2.5.

Although many advocate for the neurodiversity movement, there are criticisms which must be taken into consideration. The movement's emphasis on acceptance has been criticised for overlooking the real challenges that individuals may face in their daily lives, especially those who have higher levels of needs (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). Some have suggested that promoting autism as a natural variation may lead to those autistic individuals who do require higher levels of care finding access to support challenging and that acceptance by society will not necessarily remove individuals’ challenges with social communication and relationships. Furthermore, there are critiques of the movement not

being inclusive or representative of all neurodiverse people, with parents raising concerns about the movement's pushback against treatments and cures (Russell, 2020). It is therefore essential to acknowledge the strengths associated with neurodiversity whilst still addressing the genuine support needs of individuals.

### **2.3.2 The Medical Model of Autism**

Prior to the neurodiversity movement, the medical model was widely used throughout autism research, focussing on diagnosis, treatment, and interventions to address deficits in autistic people (Kapp, 2019; Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). Within the medical model, autism is described as a disability that is rooted within the individual. It is based on the premise that there is a typical or 'normal' level of abilities that are the standard, and that deviating from these levels is undesirable and something which requires treatment (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). Many professionals and parents still advocate for the model, pursuing treatments for their children with the intention of curing autism or encouraging their child to have a more 'normal' appearance (Chamak, 2008).

However, the medical model is often criticised for focussing on minimising 'atypical' behaviours by supporting autistic individuals to conform to neurotypical societal norms and expectations, often via interventions. These interventions frequently seek to reduce behaviours which are seen as challenging and increase skills that are deemed necessary for successful social integration in a neurotypical space. Furthermore, telling autistic individuals that their preferred way of engaging in social situations is incorrect has implications for identity development and well-being. In a review of the literature, Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) highlight the importance of connectedness for identity development and found that informing individuals that their preferred way of interacting and communicating is wrong, may lead many to develop negative views of their own autistic identity. The model also overlooks the strengths and unique abilities that autistic individuals possess, overemphasising deficits and focusing on challenges individuals may have, making the model overly oversimplistic (Dinishak, 2022). Autism is a complex and multifaceted condition, and the medical model's focus on symptom

reduction and normalisation can minimise the wide range of experiences and needs that autistic individuals have (Kapp, 2019).

### **2.3.3 The Interaction Between Theories**

Although the debate between neurodiversity advocates and those who promote a medical model often appears to be in strict opposition, work within critical disability studies has addressed the space in which social and medical models can be complementary. For example, Shakespeare (2004) provides a discussion surrounding the challenges of thinking about disabilities as dichotomies and instead suggests that there may be room for both medical and social models to work alongside each other. Similarly, in autism research, Kapp et al. (2013) discuss the challenges of seeing the medical model and the neurodiversity movements in binary opposition, suggesting that the substantial overlap between the approaches may be better supported by examining the interaction between social factors and personal deficits in a 'deficit-as-difference' model. This model would account for some members of the autistic community valuing having deficits recognised in some cases, but being recognised as a difference and not necessarily in a negative way.

The study by Kapp and colleagues highlights the different understanding of autism across stakeholders, with parents more often viewing autism through a medical model lens and autistic individuals tending to align more with neurodiversity models. It could be suggested that these differences may reflect a tendency for autistic individuals to be more concerned with autistic identity and less concerned with finding a cure for their way of being. Furthermore, it is clear that for parents of autistic children with higher support needs, their views on social models of disability are different to those of children who require less support to access society. This has implications for research, suggesting that different stakeholders may have different priorities. For example, if parents are advocating for research in line with medical models, such as behavioural interventions or treatment, but autistic individuals value research that is more in line with the objectives of the neurodiversity movement, then care must be taken to speak with the community to ensure research priority and research funding is being given to research that is important to the wider autistic community, not just a single group.

### 2.3.4 Language Use

Alongside differing models and movements within autism research, it is important to take into consideration the language and terminology used when referring to autistic people and their communities. Language helps to shape concepts, form identities, and create versions of our world. It also plays a role in reflective power structures and as researchers, the language we use shapes how people and phenomena are understood by others, especially in qualitative research (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kuntz, 2010). Recent research highlights that many autistic individuals show a preference for identity-first language (Bury et al., 2023), and many autistic adults prefer the use of diversity-focused language (Kenny et al., 2016), however, this may not be the case for non-English speaking countries (De Laet et al., 2023). Furthermore, the terms Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or 'autistic' have been used throughout this thesis over 'disorder', as this term is widely rejected by many autistic individuals, who emphasise that being autistic is a natural variation in the human population, not a disorder that needs to be cured (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). As researchers, it is important to acknowledge the influence language choices make and respect the preferences of the autistic community.

However, it must be noted that these views do not reflect all autistic people or other members of the autistic community such as parents, and most opinions are from autistic adults who are able to take part in debates surrounding language use. This means that the preferences of autistic individuals with higher support needs or those who are non-verbal and therefore unable to access these discussions easily, are likely missing or are unheard. As autism is a spectrum or constellation of abilities, disabilities, strengths and challenges, some suggest that it requires the use of a broad spectrum of descriptors (Lombardo & Mandelli, 2022). There have been critiques that removing or censoring language may be detrimental to some autistic individuals and their families. For example, Singer et al. (2023) provide a discussion surrounding the limitations of using a single label or terminology to represent the entire autism spectrum, as doing so fails to capture the diversity and complexity within the condition. Singer and colleagues advocate for a more

inclusive approach that recognises various perspectives and voices, which aligns with the principles of the neurodiversity movement. However, they stress the need for language that accommodates different terms and viewpoints, promoting respectful communication, and fostering a more accurate and holistic understanding of autism. Others have responded, stating that the language proposed by Singer et al. is ableist and that the terms used could be seen as dehumanising (Natri et al., 2023).

### **2.3.5 Language Use in the Current Thesis**

The discussion surrounding language use is ongoing, and more research is needed that includes the voices of the whole autistic community, including those with learning difficulties and those who are non-verbal, to create a more accurate picture of people's preferences and needs. With this in mind, the research presented throughout this thesis is framed from a neurodiversity perspective, however, the differing opinions of the community are acknowledged despite the use of neurodiversity-affirming language throughout. Medicalised or potentially stigmatising terminology (e.g., disorder, high/low functioning) have been avoided throughout and identity-first language (e.g., autistic child) and not person-first language (e.g., child with autism) has been used, following the majority preference of the autism community (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016). However, the differing needs of children, and the acknowledgement that some children may require more support than others because of these needs, are addressed throughout this thesis.

## **2.4 Friendship Development**

### **2.4.1 Middle Childhood**

Friendships are a specific form of peer relationships that are voluntary and reciprocal in nature (Hartup, 1996). They often play an important role in children's development, providing a source of social support and acting as a protective factor against certain challenges, such as bullying (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018). Furthermore, friendships are

related to multiple outcomes including behaviour, mental health, and school performance (Rubin et al., 2015) and are therefore an important phenomenon to understand.

Multiple theories aim to explain the development of friendships throughout childhood and across the lifespan. Early theories of friendship suggested that individuals are motivated to seek interpersonal situations in order to satisfy their social needs (Sullivan, 2013). This interpersonal theory of friendship implies that social needs change with each developmental stage, with younger children using friendship interactions for the development of social skills and as a time for comparison, whereas older children move towards experiences of closeness and reciprocity. The theory helps to provide a framework for why some children who may be seen as 'different' by peers benefit from making friends with each other as children may be motivated to resolve the feeling of isolation by making friends with other isolated peers who may share some of their needs and preferences.

Hartup (1995) expanded on Sullivan's theory by moving away from acceptance and rejection, instead emphasising the importance of multi-dimensional friendships. Influenced by behaviourism and social exchange theories, and by Sullivan's interpersonal theory of friendship, Hartup suggested that friendships have 'three faces'; having friends, the identity of friends, and friendship quality. His theory emphasises the importance that friendships can have on development across the lifespan, highlighting how friendships are not only important for fostering a sense of self-esteem and good well-being, but can also act as cognitive resources as children navigate age-related tasks (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). The theory highlights some of the challenges of investigating children's friendships as some children may state they have friendships due to social desirability as opposed to friendships being mutual, making the phenomenon difficult to explore. This theory also supports the idea that friendships may look different to different individuals, and that not all friendships will be qualitatively similar and nor do they need to be.

Neurotypical definitions of friendships often involve companionship, intimacy, affection, and mutual help, and are often characterised by more intense social activity than non-friendship relationships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). For example,



companionship is found to change during middle childhood, with children moving away from wanting to spend enjoyable time with peers to wanting that time to now involve shared interests and a variety of settings in which they interact (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013). Friendships are often complex in nature, intertwining with developmental processes such as social and communication skills (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2007). Not only are sufficient levels of social skills required to form friendships, but being around peer groups provides an opportunity for children to practice communication and conflict resolution, whilst allowing children to engage in emotional experiences such as companionship and intimacy (Bukowski et al., 1994). Therefore, having differing social and communication profiles to peers may place some children at risk of friendship difficulties. This may especially be the case for autistic children who often have different levels of pragmatic language ability and social skills compared to their non-autistic and neurotypical peers and may therefore be more likely to be misunderstood by peers.

The key focus of this thesis is on autistic children in Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11 years), the years in which children are in a period referred to as middle childhood. Middle childhood spans from approximately the ages of 6-12 years and is often characterised by cognitive, social, and emotional changes that significantly influence the way children form and maintain friendships (Charlesworth et al., 2011). In the earlier stages of middle childhood, friendships often develop out of shared activities and interests, with children tending to favour those who engage in similar activities, such as shared gameplay or hobbies. These common activities serve as a platform for social interaction and the development of mutual understanding and friendships (Asher & Paquette, 2003). Middle childhood friendships often involve a give-and-take dynamic, where children learn the significance of sharing, compromise, and negotiation (Hartup, 1984). Reciprocity builds a foundation of trust, allowing individuals to rely on their friends for emotional support and companionship which often comes with an increase in emotional intimacy. Children also begin to move away from relying on adults, and place greater importance on peers, increasing their intimate disclosure to friends (Buhrmester, 1998). This emotional

intimacy with peers not only provides a sense of belonging but also nurtures empathy and understanding, essential skills for maintaining healthy relationships throughout life.

Middle childhood is marked by advances in perspective-taking abilities and the emergence of a more nuanced understanding of social norms and social networks (Charlesworth et al., 2011), significantly impacting on friendship dynamics as children age. An increase in being able to consider the thoughts and feelings of their peers enhances communication and cooperation within friendships, fostering deeper connections than those developed in early childhood, often explained by the development of children's Theory of Mind. Given that studies have found differences in ToM skills in autistic children compared to their peers, it could be suggested that this period may be challenging for some children as they navigate changing friendships.

Middle childhood is a period in which friendship development goes through key changes, moving from shared gameplay to intimate, emotional bonds. The move from activity-based friendships to those characterised by emotional intimacy, reciprocity, and trust are areas that may be challenging for some autistic children given their different definitions and wants from friendships (Finke, 2023).

#### **2.4.2 Friendships in Autistic Children**

An in-depth review of the experiences of primary-aged children is presented in a systematic review in Chapter 3. The following section discusses in more detail the wider literature surrounding friendships in autistic children and the influences that being autistic may have on their friendships.

Having difficulties with developing peer relationships is thought to be a key characteristic of being autistic (APA, 2013), sometimes resulting in autistic children being perceived to show a preference for being on their own as opposed to wanting to engage with peers (Church et al., 2000; Portway & Johnson, 2003). Studies exploring the experiences of autistic children and young people show that autistic individuals do have difficulties with their friendship development and maintenance. For example, studies have found quantitative differences in the number of friendships made and maintained by autistic people (Petrina et al., 2014) as well as qualitative differences in the length of

friendships and intensity of the relationships compared to neurotypical peers (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger & Shulman, 2003).

An observational study by Bauminger et al. (2008) found differences in friendship patterns between autistic children and their neurotypical peers. The study found that during shared gameplay, autistic children spent more time engaged in parallel play compared to peers. Parallel play involves fewer reciprocal interactions and joint planning than cooperative or interactive play. This can result in a decrease in children sharing goals during play interactions, which is essential for building companionship, a crucial aspect of friendship (Buhrmester, 1998). The study also highlighted the challenges some autistic children had with their friendships, with children self-reporting lower levels of intimacy and closeness compared to neurotypical peers. Furthermore, younger autistic children in the study perceived their friendships to be higher on companionship and help, and lower on conflict, whereas older children were more negative in their evaluations of friendships. The authors suggest that this may be as a result of younger children being unable to accurately report on their friendship experiences. However, it may be that the things autistic children value in their friendships simply change with age, even over the small age range (8-12 years) of Bauminger et al.'s study. Therefore, studies investigating the experiences of children over time may be beneficial in understanding this further, alongside studies that aim to gather more in-depth accounts from autistic children on what they value in their friendships. It must be noted that all autistic children within the study were reported to have receptive language abilities in the normal range and all had successful friendships of over six months in length, therefore the findings may not reflect the experiences of autistic children who struggle to make and maintain friendships. The study also largely underrepresented autistic girls who are likely to have different experiences to their male peers.

Similarly, Kasari et al. (2011) compared the social interactions of autistic children (6-11 years) with their peers at school. Autistic children nominated fewer peers as friends and were nominated less as a friend by peers. They had fewer reciprocal best friends compared to neurotypical peers and were reported to have lower friendship quality than

their neurotypical peers based on the Friendship Quality Scale (FQS). However, although the FQS has been used across studies including autistic children, it is likely that the statements included are based on neurotypical markers of successful friendships and therefore the quality of children's friendships may not have been accurately assessed. Including more qualitative methods and allowing children to expand on their answers may help to better understand their friendship experiences. Interestingly, the study found that autistic children who had at least one reciprocal friend were no more engaged in playground activities with peers than autistic children without a reported mutual friendship. The playground is likely a challenging place for autistic children given their additional sensory needs, and even those with reciprocal friends may therefore struggle to engage in gameplay in such a setting. This further highlights the challenges with traditional methods, as teacher reports or playground observations may not be able to accurately reflect the friendship experiences of this group of children.

Though it is clear from previous literature that autistic children experience fewer friendships and increased difficulties with their ability to maintain good quality, reciprocal peer relationships, little is known about how younger autistic children feel about their friendships. As shown above, many studies investigating childhood explore the experiences of school staff and parents, use playground observations, and many focus on those of an older age, such as adolescence (Cook et al., 2018; Finke, 2023). As middle childhood is an important time for friendship development in neurotypical children, the experiences of autistic children in this developmental phase should also be a priority. The lack of research into direct experiences may also impact on the ways we understand children's friendship wants and needs, as it is clear that their experiences are different to those reported by peers and key adults and should be made a priority.

The evidence above suggests that autistic children struggle in forming friendships, often due to miscommunication and difficulty in being understood by their neurotypical peers. Autistic children's social styles are likely to be different from those of their non-autistic peers, causing mutual misunderstanding and difficulties with social interactions (the double empathy problem), which has been found to impact on friendships

(Mendelson et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2021). This mutual misunderstanding has been shown to result in non-autistic people having negative perceptions of autistic people, perhaps contributing to their social exclusion (Mitchell et al., 2021), something which may be particularly challenging during middle childhood when social networks become more complex. Due to autistic children's different social preferences, some adults or peers may interpret this as children not wanting or desiring friendships, though research with autistic individuals shows this not to be the case (Cresswell et al., 2019). Many young autistic people have spoken about the importance they place on friendships and their want to be able to fit in with their peers (Calder et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2022; Sumiya et al., 2018), but, as discussed above, studies show that the friendships they experience are usually lower quality than those of their non-autistic peers (Sedgewick & Pellicano, 2019). Despite reporting lower quality friendships, the literature suggests that autistic children can and do make friends, and that many actively want to do so (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010) highlighting the importance of speaking with autistic children.

Given the experiences discussed here, it could be suggested that the way autistic children's friendships are described and conceptualised may need to be reconsidered, along with considering how interventions are designed to improve friendship outcomes where desired. Many autistic children perceive friendship in a qualitatively different manner to their neurotypical peers, however, these children often report being happy and satisfied with their friendships (Calder et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding the differences in friendship preferences may be more useful for supporting individuals than focusing on social deficits. This would allow autistic children to focus on the things they value in friendships rather than comparing their friendship wants to those of non-autistic children which promotes neurotypicality as the norm. Friendship norms for neurotypical individuals have been well researched, and studies show that norms influence friendships regardless of gender (Hall, 2011). The norms surrounding autistic friendships however are much less clear. A recent comparative study exploring the experiences of young autistic and non-autistic adults found differences in individuals' preferences for friendship

activities, with autistic people showing more preference for meeting up to engage in a specific activity with friends over meeting up to chat; valuing fun in a friendship over support; having fewer in-person meetings with friends; and having a larger proportion of friends that they had never met “in real life” compared to the non-autistic participants (Finke, 2023). These results suggest that the autistic young people in the study preferred to behave in friendships in ways that are different from non-autistic young adults. This has implications for interventions that target skills as these are often based on neurotypical standards and expectations for friendship behaviours and may not be areas that autistic individuals value. Therefore, providing autistic individuals with the space to express what their preferences are for their socially significant relationships would help support autistic people in having the friendship outcomes they want and be well aligned with the neurodiversity movement.

In line with the double empathy problem, autistic individuals have also reported feeling more comfortable interacting with other autistic people. In an interview study with autistic adults, Crompton et al. (2020a) found that autistic individuals felt more comfortable and at ease with other autistic people compared to when they spent time with neurotypical peers, expressing that this may be linked to feeling better understood. The participants reiterated the pressures they felt of conforming to neurotypical social norms when around non-autistic peers and family members, and the study highlights the possible positive outcomes of developing friendships with other autistic individuals. Social norms can be described as the ways in which it is generally accepted to communicate or the behaviours that are seen as desirable within the neurotypical population (Fenning et al., 2011). Similarly, a recent scoping review identified that friendships for autistic individuals across a range of ages (from childhood into adulthood) were often based on homophily, with autistic people tending to make friends with other autistic individuals (Black et al., 2022). This preference for homophily, which is also found in neurotypical individuals (McPherson et al., 2001), suggests that school placement may impact on children's friendships. As autistic children are likely to be surrounded by more neurotypical peers than autistic peers when placed in an inclusive,

mainstream classroom, the school setting they attend may reduce their ability to engage with others who have similar needs to themselves, impacting upon their experiences. Similarly, non-autistic peers may show a preference for other non-autistic children, reducing opportunities for social relationships and friendships to form.

#### *2.4.2.1 Impact of School Setting*

As previously discussed, autistic children in receipt of an EHCP have a legal right to support and have the option of being educated in mainstream or specialist settings. Studies have shown that being around peers who are similar to oneself is supportive of friendship development and maintenance (McPherson et al., 2001), which may suggest that those attending special schools may have fewer difficulties with friendships, given the higher number of children with similar needs in their school environment.

It has been found that, for some, attending mainstream settings is enabling and provides opportunities both socially and academically for autistic children to thrive. Although challenges were still present, as would be expected with all children attending school, Tomlinson et al. (2022) found that having an inclusive school ethos with staff who were aware and supportive of autistic children's needs helped young autistic girls to successfully navigate mainstream settings. Having supportive relationships with staff members was imperative to this success, along with the school having a student-led approach to support.

However, a growing body of literature suggests that the experiences of autistic students in mainstream schools are complex and often challenging. Rowley et al. (2012) investigated friendship, bullying and victimisation in autistic children, those with other special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs), and neurotypical peers by school placement, using teacher, parent, and child self-reports. Interestingly throughout the study, teacher reports more accurately reflected the friendship levels reported by children, whereas parent reports often underestimated children's meaningful friendships, highlighting the importance of exploring multiple perspectives within studies of children's friendships. The study also found that for those with any SEND, friendship rates were lower than for neurotypical children, and 40% of autistic pupils reported

feeling socially excluded or rejected across school settings. In the same study, autistic children with stronger social communication skills reported more meaningful friendships. However, children who had fewer challenges with social skills also reported higher victimisation in mainstream education. It may be that children with higher levels of social skills are better able to report their friendships, suggesting that those with social communication difficulties may still have meaningful friendships, but find it harder to express how they feel about the relationship. It could also suggest that for those with more obvious social challenges peers may be more accepting or understanding as lower levels of victimisation did not differ between school settings for these individuals. The study did not report the impact of gender on children's experiences of friendships and autistic girls were largely underrepresented in the study making up just 12% of the autistic participants.

Humphrey and Hebron (2015) found that autistic children and young people were more likely to be bullied than neurotypical children and children with other SENDs. This was especially the case for those students with stronger social skills in early adolescence who were attending mainstream education, in line with previous findings (Rowley et al., 2012). This implies that there may be a need for further support for those children preparing for the transition to mainstream secondary school, who may face more challenges than those attending special schools or those who struggle more with social interactions and are therefore more likely to receive higher levels of support in mainstream education. It also highlights the importance of exploring the experiences of those in middle childhood, as the research is predominantly focused on adolescents or those who have recently transitioned into a secondary school setting.

Cook et al. (2016) also investigated how autistic young people experienced friendships and bullying in mainstream and special schools. Four key themes were developed: friendship and bullying, risk factors, protective factors, and outcomes. Autistic young people tended to befriend peers who were also autistic, and external risks were higher in mainstream settings, with bullying being much more prevalent than in special schools. Despite this, no systemic differences were found between school settings with



regard to friendship; however, special settings appeared to be a more suitable environment for staff to provide support and facilitate peer relationships. The study suggests that participants' academic and social needs were not addressed adequately in mainstream settings, but that supportive friendships were an important buffer against bullying for these individuals. Therefore, it could be suggested that staff in mainstream settings may benefit from extra training with regard to the needs of autistic children, for example, by providing more consistent support from teaching assistants to facilitate friendships and reduce bullying in mainstream settings.

Most research into school experiences focuses on those transitioning to or already attending secondary settings, meaning that less is known about the experiences of primary-aged children. However, a study exploring this age range via parents and educators highlighted that many children had mixed experiences of attending mainstream settings (Hodges et al., 2020). Similarly to adolescents, school culture and a feeling of belonging were deemed to be important in relation to success at school, and a need for consistent support and embracing differences was called for by adults. The study highlighted the concerns of key adults and the differing priorities these two groups had, with teachers feeling pressure to meet what they perceived as parents' unrealistic expectations and parents being critical of educators, and in response, educators being defensive. This shows the importance of including multiple perspectives in research if we are to gain a clearer understanding of the needs of autistic individuals and their communities. It must be noted, that although the study provides a good overview of the barriers and facilitators some autistic children face in mainstream primary, the voices of autistic children were absent.

It is clear that many autistic children express the value of having support with regard to their friendships, and school type may also play a role in the support that children are able to access. Studies exploring the support needs of individuals have shown that those attending special schools often report being able to access support more easily than their peers in mainstream education (Crane et al., 2022). Furthermore, many special schools are able to offer higher staff-to-student ratios in comparison to mainstream

settings, and staff are more likely to have received specialist training and it is likely that difficulties with communicating in neurotypical ways may be minimised in special educational settings. For example, staff are more likely to be comfortable using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) in a special school, such as the use of Makaton or text-to-speech devices. Therefore, children who may have difficulties socially communicating verbally with others may be better supported in special schools compared to mainstream, simply because of additional knowledge and training of staff members and the resources available to them.

Finally, it must be noted that throughout the literature there is a large focus on children attending mainstream settings, with the voices of those attending special schools or resource bases are often absent. A recent systematic review highlights the underrepresentation of autistic children attending special schools in research, suggesting that there is a need for more inclusive research that seeks the experiences of this cohort (Adams et al., 2019). It is imperative that the voices of all children are listened to and amplified, not just those who are able to engage in traditional research methods.

#### *2.4.2.2 Gender and Autism*

Historically, studies have shown a significantly greater number of boys than girls in the autistic population, with a ratio of around 4:1 (APA, 2013). However, in recent years, interest in autistic females has risen, highlighting the likelihood that autism may manifest differently in girls, with a recent meta-analysis showing that the ratio is more likely to be around 3:1 Loomes et al. (2017). This has implications for friendship development, given the gender differences in social norms that are evident in neurotypical children. Research suggests that boys and girls may have differing friendship preferences and communication styles with boys' friendships during middle childhood tending to be characterised by shared activities and common interests, while girls often emphasize emotional closeness and engage in more communication-based activities (Dean et al., 2014).

As a result of these differences in friendship style, a key challenge that girls appear to experience more often than boys is the use of masking to hide their differences. A

study by Dean et al. (2017) found that girls hid their social challenges more than boys, often staying in closer proximity to peers, which may result in adults presuming children have successful friendships due to being near other children, a finding which is also highlighted in a recent report into the experiences of young autistic people transitioning to secondary school (Mesa & Hamilton, 2022a). This again emphasises the importance of speaking with children and not solely relying on the use of adult reports or playground observations, as looking for social isolation on the playground when identifying children with social challenges will likely leave many girls with friendship difficulties unidentified.

Cook et al. (2018) investigated experiences of learning, friendship and bullying in autistic females. Their findings suggest that girls with autism experienced friendship differently compared to their neurotypical peers, and they often had differing expectations of what friendships were. Girls were found to gravitate towards peers with similar needs in both mainstream and special settings and were found to form friendship groups more easily in mainstream compared to special settings. Though friendship groups may have been easier to form, bullying in mainstream settings appeared to be more intentional, and those in mainstream were found to be absent from school more often than those in special settings. Girls in mainstream schools were also found to engage in masking more often than those in a specialised setting, which may account for the increased ease with which they formed friendship groups. Individuals in special settings reported that they had the additional challenge of their peers' social processing needs, which may act as a further barrier to developing peer relationships, a possible example of the double empathy problem between children with different additional needs, as opposed to between autistic and neurotypical children. Furthermore, friendship was seen by the students predominantly as companionship, in line with younger neurotypical ideas of what friendships are, which may pose issues with regard to current interventions which often focus on using long-lasting friendships as a way of encouraging better well-being (Calder et al., 2013). Understanding that autistic girls may have different expectations of what friendships are and how they would be best supported is highly

important, especially in primary school when social networks and friendship characteristics are changing rapidly.

Tomlinson et al. (2022) also found that engaging with masking was a key coping mechanism in girls which appeared to result in adult reports of difficulties being minimised. Furthermore, masking has been found to be correlated with mental health difficulties, showing the importance of promoting acceptance of autistic individuals' social skills and traits in society (van der Putten et al., 2023). Although masking is also present in some autistic boys, it has been shown to be much more prevalent in girls, leading to implications when thinking about children's friendships and the support they may need as autistic girls may be at higher risk of having their social challenges misidentified.

The differing experiences presented here highlight the importance of investigating how children experience friendship on an individual level to explore how we can best support autistic children with their social development and well-being. It may be that some children do not perceive themselves as having difficulties with peers, irrespective of adult perspectives, and therefore enrolling a child in an intervention aimed at increasing their social skills and friendships may be frustrating and potentially harmful to the individual. It is also likely that girls may require different forms of support compared to boys and that interventions will likely need to be adapted as children move through primary school and for those attending different settings.

## **2.5 Friendship Support**

As friendships are complex in nature, it is key that interventions should reflect this. The focus on one specific skill set, for example developing neurotypical social skills such as the maintenance of eye contact or intonation during speech, or increasing ToM skills, is unlikely to be unbeneficial to autistic children in isolation. Past interventions have predominantly focused on the teaching of skills deemed helpful in neurotypical social situations in an attempt to improve outcomes for autistic people. This teaching often comes in the form of social skills training sessions, or parent and peer mentoring programmes and some interventions are reported to have helped autistic children with

positive social behaviours, increased social interaction, and play skills (Frankel et al., 2010; Walton & Ingersoll, 2013). The key types of support available to autistic children will now be discussed.

Social stories are commonly used to provide autistic individuals with specific guidelines and rules for interacting with others (Gray & Garand, 1993). The short narratives explicitly state how to behave in social situations and often provide suggestions for questions children may want to ask when engaging with peers. For example, stories may instruct children on how to introduce themselves or how to initiate a conversation. However, evidence for the efficacy of these interventions differs. In a review of the literature, Karal and Wolfe (2018) concluded that social stories can have a positive impact on the social interaction of autistic children, but due to inconsistent implementation methods could not ascertain if the social story was effective in isolation. Previous studies have also raised concerns about the effectiveness of social stories with many meta-analyses concluding that interventions had questionable or ineffective results (Mayton et al., 2013; Reynhout & Carter, 2011). More recently, studies investigating the effectiveness of social stories report that interventions were effective in changing or reducing 'inappropriate behaviours' (Aldabas, 2019; Hanrahan et al., 2020). This highlights how the interventions' focus is on teaching autistic children 'appropriate' and neurotypical norms and instructing children to adhere to them in order to have successful social interaction.

Similarly, parent-led interventions focus on the explicit teaching of neurotypical social skills. One example of a parent-assisted social training intervention is PEERS, a programme which provides group sessions for both autistic children and their parents. Autistic individuals are taught social skills, often via role-play demonstrations, whilst parents are taught how to support their children in making and maintaining friends. Studies have shown that after attending the intervention autistic adolescents (Laugeson et al., 2009) and young adults (Gantman et al., 2012; Laugeson et al., 2015) showed an improvement in their knowledge of social skills and had improved their overall social skills. The studies, however, relied heavily on parent reports for social skills outcomes, and therefore results must be treated with caution. Although parents reported an increase

in social skills, it may be that young people were simply masking as a result of gaining an insight into neurotypical norms, which may be detrimental to mental health and well-being in the longer term.

Peer mentoring or buddy systems are a further form of intervention that is regularly provided to support autistic children. Autistic children are often 'buddied up' with a neurotypical peer from class, who then models appropriate social interaction abilities and provides feedback to the autistic child (Wagner, 2002). A major criticism surrounding the use of peer buddy systems is the emphasis on modelling neurotypical behaviours, therefore implying that the ways in which autistic children act and feel are wrong. Studies have shown that connectedness to the autistic community and having a positive autistic identity have key implications for good mental health and well-being (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022), something which children may not feel if they are predominantly surrounded by peers enforcing neurotypical social norms. Recent studies have shown that autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is just as successful as when non-autistic individuals engage with each other (Crompton et al., 2020b) and autistic-led support programmes have been well received by the autistic community (Crane et al., 2023). This suggests that 'buddying' autistic children with other autistic peers may be a more appropriate way of supporting individuals with their social interactions and friendships, in line with the double empathy problem. Allowing autistic children to communicate in ways they feel comfortable with peers who likely understand their differences in a way non-autistic peers may not, may be beneficial not only for friendship development, but identity development and good well-being.

An alternative way that autistic children's friendship development may be supported is through the use of play interventions. As with friendships, the play preferences of autistic children differ from those of their non-autistic peers, often including differences in pretend play and social play (Lord et al., 2000) which may impact social interactions and friendship development. Autistic children have been shown to face challenges with social play and group play (Jordan, 2003; Wolfberg & Schuler, 2006), two areas which may be increasingly important for friendship development in middle

childhood given children's shift away from solitary and parallel play. In children with Developmental Language Disorder, play has been found to provide the opportunity for children to practise and learn key social skills (Toseeb et al., 2020). Therefore, it could be suggested that play may be a useful tool in fostering autistic children's participation in inclusive settings, such as mainstream schools, where children may have differing levels of social communication skills. A recent scoping review found that play interventions may be a successful way of supporting younger autistic children with their social and communication development and highlighted the importance of having child-led interventions to promote autonomy (Gibson et al., 2021). Compared to interventions that explicitly teach social skills, supporting children through play may be a more naturalistic way of fostering children's skills and friendships.

It is clear that a large number of interventions aimed at supporting autistic children with their friendship development and maintenance do so by promoting neurotypical definitions of friendships. Despite this, steps are being taken to include the autistic community in intervention designs. Recently, a study by Walton et al. (2023) acknowledged the importance of including stakeholders in research surrounding social communication and support needs. The study investigated which social communication skills were viewed as important by parents, teachers, and expert clinicians working with young autistic children (aged 2-6 years) and examined if priorities differed between the stakeholders. All three groups believed that expressive communication and social interaction behaviours were key when considering support. However, there were areas of need discussed by teachers and parents that were less common amongst clinicians. For example, parents and teachers spoke of the challenges surrounding emotion regulation and the link to social communication abilities, and the impact this had on children's relationships. Furthermore, parents in particular highlighted how a child's social environment influenced their social communication, stating that the age of peers, familiarity, and the settings ability/willingness to accommodate the needs of their child influenced social success. Parents and teachers explained how children experienced more successful and meaningful interactions with peers when those peers or social partners

were able to adapt to autistic children's communication style. This suggests that interventions that include support for peers and key adults with adapting their communication style, as opposed to teaching autistic children neurotypical social communication skills, may help children to have more meaningful social interactions which may in turn support friendship development. The study also highlights the importance of including multiple stakeholders in the development and implementation of support, given that key barriers to social interaction for parents and teachers did not always align with those of expert clinicians.

It is evident that supporting autistic children who wish to make and maintain friendships is important, and that the ways in which adults and peers support these individuals must be done in a way that does not promote only neurotypical norms. Crucially, it must be taken into account that each autistic individual has their own unique strengths, difficulties, and needs and these must be the central concern for anyone working with or supporting autistic children. Listening to autistic children and including them in their support plans and intervention design may be a key way in which friendship interventions can improve to support individuals.

## **2.6 Aims of the Current Research**

To summarise, autistic children are at risk of facing challenges with the development and maintenance of friendships which is a problem primarily because many autistic children and young people express the want for friends (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010). Researchers have highlighted differing friendship definitions for autistic children (Finke, 2023), and targeted interventions predominantly focus on the teaching of neurotypical norms which may not be in line with autistic children's friendship wants. It is also clear that the direct experiences of younger children are largely missing, and that the perceptions of adults and children often differ, with many adults focussing on the teaching of neurotypical social skills and the need for larger groups of friends, whilst young people valued companionship and feeling of belonging (Kuo et al., 2013). This highlights the need for an inclusive research approach that allows the voices of autistic children to be heard. This is central to the current research and is described in greater detail in Chapter 4.



This project was designed to contribute to the current understanding of autistic children's friendships by including the voices of young people and their key adults. Firstly, I systematically searched and synthesised existing literature related to the friendship experiences of autistic children in a UK context, the findings of which are presented in Chapter 3. Chapters 4-6 present a multi-informant study using creative methods to explore the friendship experiences of autistic children in Key Stage 2 and their parents and teaching staff. Chapter 7 presents parental perspectives on the importance of friendships during school transition. Finally, the results from all three studies are discussed in Chapter 8.

The following overarching research questions are addressed by this body of work:

1. What are the friendship experiences of autistic children, and do these experiences differ on the basis of school type or gender?
2. Do the friendship experiences of autistic children, as described by the children themselves, differ from parent and teacher accounts?

# Chapter 3: Study One - Experiences of Friendships Among Autistic Children in UK Schools: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis.

## 3.1 Introduction

The objective of this review was to synthesise findings from studies that have focused on the friendship experiences of primary school-aged autistic children enrolled in mainstream or special school settings in the United Kingdom (UK). The review was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the friendship experiences of autistic children aged 4 to 11 years in mainstream and specialised school settings in the UK?
- Do autistic children in mainstream settings experience friendships differently to those attending specialised educational settings?

## 3.2 Methods

This review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2015). This involved searching for, locating, and quality appraising all relevant studies that addressed the research questions. A systematic literature search was conducted on six databases (PsycNET, PsychINFO, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), British Education Index, Web of Science, and Scopus). Search terms focusing on ‘autism’, ‘primary school’, and ‘friendships’ were used to identify articles relevant to the review (see Appendix A for complete search strings). Grey literature searches were also carried out on the funding websites Economic and Social Research Council and the Education Endowment Foundation to identify any relevant studies and reports that were not included in the published literature. A search for pre-prints was conducted on PsyArXiv using the same search strings.

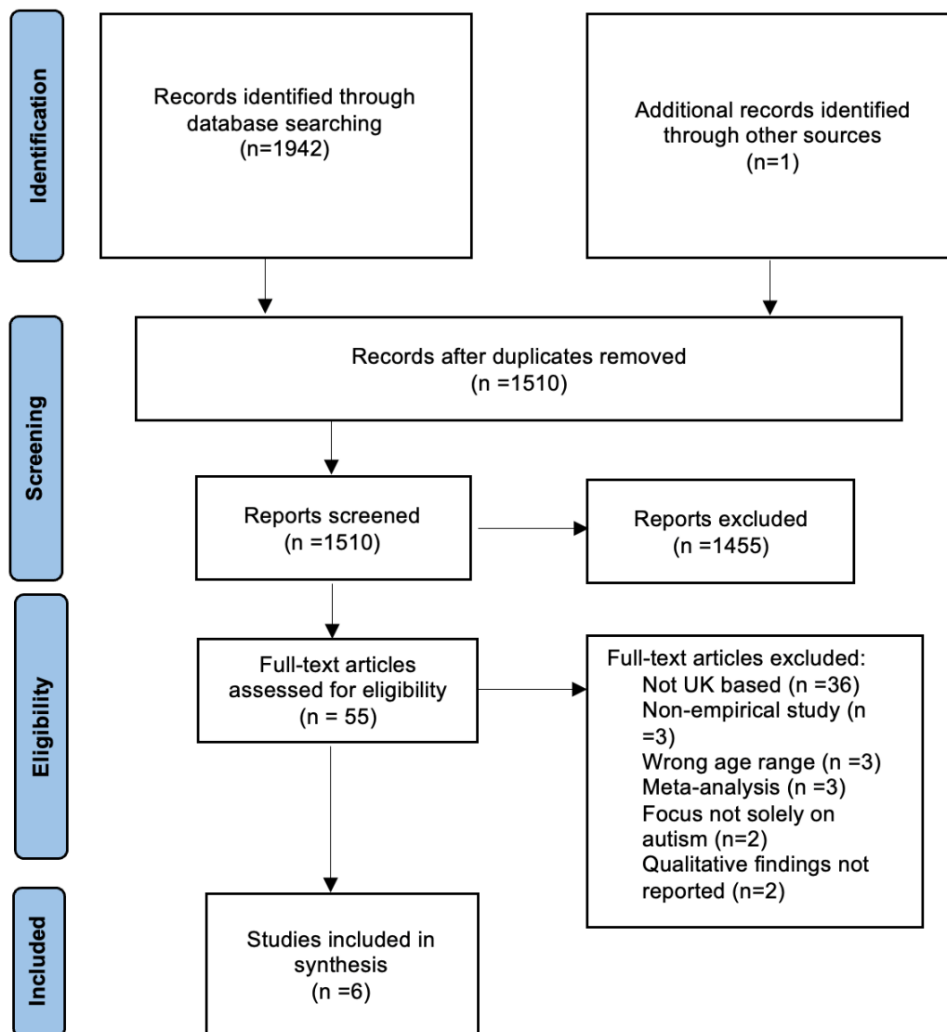
In addition to the electronic searches, the reference lists in papers identified as relevant for full-text screening were checked to identify any further studies that might

fulfil the inclusion criteria but had not been identified by the database searches. Any systematic reviews or meta-analyses identified were retained and their included studies were hand-searched to identify those which fulfilled the current inclusion criteria. Hand searches were carried out by Rosina Williams (RW), an intern from the University of York who was working with the GenOmics And Life Stories lab (GOALS) at the time.

### **3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria and Quality Assessment**

Initial database searches were conducted in October 2021 and searches were updated in April 2022. In total, the combined searches identified 1943 papers (Figure 1). Relevant studies that were published between 2011 and 2022 were eligible for inclusion. Studies were required to have elicited the views of at least one autistic child (aged 4-11 years) attending a mainstream or special school in the UK, or a key stakeholder in that child's life (i.e. a parent, carer, or teacher) and to have focused explicitly on the child's friendships.

**Figure 1:** *Study One PRISMA flow diagram Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021)*



Studies which fulfilled the inclusion criteria were identified through a screening process carried out by myself (LF) and RW. Articles identified via search strings were exported from databases to a shared spreadsheet, and duplicates were removed. We screened a sample (10%) of titles together and any disagreements were resolved through discussion. Once agreement was reached, RW screened the remaining articles by title and abstract, raising any problems or uncertainties with me for discussion. Finally, RW screened the full text of the remaining articles and any issues during this phase were resolved via discussions with me. Where it was unclear if a paper should be included due to insufficient information on participants (e.g. age range or location), the corresponding author of the paper was contacted for further information; this was done on two occasions. Where the age range of study participants included those older than 11 years,

papers were excluded if the results were not split by age, i.e. if papers included secondary school-aged children in the same group as primary-aged children ( $n=6$ ).

In order to assess the quality of the included articles the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative checklist was used. This tool is designed to assess the quality of qualitative studies and consists of 10 focused questions relating to the appropriateness of the research question, the suitability of the methodology, and ethical considerations. RW and I applied the checklist to all articles included in the review, with the exception of a paper I had written (which can be found in Chapter 7), for which only RW assessed the quality to ensure the quality assessment was unbiased. Quality assessment results were then compared, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Papers were classified as “robust” (if they fulfilled at least five of the above criteria) or “less robust” if they did not. All studies received a rating of 5 or higher.

### **3.2.2 Characteristics of Included Studies**

Six papers were included in the synthesis. The characteristics of the studies are provided in Table 1. Three studies were conducted in England, two studies stated that they were conducted in the United Kingdom but did not specify a country, and one study was carried out in Wales. Participant numbers ranged from one to 14. One study focussed on special school settings only (Bradley & Male, 2017), one study included both mainstream and special schools (Fox et al., 2023), two included the experiences and perceptions of children attending mainstream schools (Calder et al., 2013; Potter, 2015), and two explored friendships of autistic children attending resource bases attached to mainstream schools (Conn, 2014; Warren et al., 2021). Resource bases aim to provide targeted educational support to children with additional needs whilst still providing the opportunity for children to access a mainstream curriculum.

Most studies ( $n=5$ ) employed a qualitative approach to data collection while one study used a mixed-methods approach. For the purpose of this qualitative meta-synthesis, quantitative data reported in this study (Calder et al., 2013) was not included in the synthesis. Five of the studies gathered data from multiple informants, eliciting the views

of autistic children, school staff members, support workers, and parents. One study (Fox et al., 2023) elicited the voices of parents only.

**Table 1: Study characteristics of included papers**

<b>Study and location</b>	<b>Aim/Focus</b>	<b>Informant(s)</b>	<b>Autistic student participants</b>	<b>School setting</b>	<b>Data collection methods</b>	<b>Quality Rating</b>
Bradley & Male (2017) England	To explore the views of autistic young people surrounding their Forest School experience.	Autistic children, 3 mothers and 2 educational professionals also included	Four autistic boys 6-8 years	Special	Flexible, multi-methods used with children. Video observations. One-to-one interviews supported by verbal and visual prompts. Semi-structured interviews carried out with adults.	5
Calder et al., (2013) England	To investigate the extent and nature of autistic children's friendships	Autistic children, 11 mothers, 8 teachers	12 autistic children, eight males, four females 9-11 years	Mainstream	Structured observations. Semi-structured interviews with autistic children and adults.	9
Conn (2014) Wales	To investigate the social engagement of an autistic child.	Autistic child, Class teacher, support worker, mother, peer group.	One male autistic child 9 years	Mainstream with specialist base	Observations, semi-structured interviews with adults, semi-structured conference sessions with child.	7
Fox et al., (2022) England	To explore how parents experienced the impact of school transition on their autistic child's friendships across educational settings during the pandemic	Mothers	14 autistic children and young people. nine autistic children were aged 7-12 years	Special and mainstream	Semi-structured interviews	9
Potter, C (2015) UK	To gain the autistic child's perspectives on friendships.	Autistic child, mother and 2 school workers	One male autistic child 10 years	Mainstream	Observations, scrapbooking and conversations with children. Semi-structured interviews with adults. Diaries kept by mother and classroom assistant.	9
Warren et al., (2021) England	To explore how children and teachers experience resourced provision and manage the daily transitions between activities and classes.	Autistic children, 1 class teacher, 5 teaching assistants	Five autistic boys 9-11 years	Resource provision attached to mainstream school	Storyboards and interviews with children, Semi-structured interviews with adults.	8

### **3.2.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis**

A qualitative meta-synthesis was carried out using a thematic synthesis approach (Nye et al., 2016; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Qualitative meta-syntheses provide a common understanding of the nature of a phenomenon by interpreting and synthesising qualitative findings across individual qualitative studies (Thorne et al., 2004). Meta-syntheses vary in the level of interpretation they include, with some methods such as narrative synthesis aiming to provide a descriptive summary of the findings. Others, such as thematic synthesis, aim to go beyond the findings of primary studies and transform the data, providing a fresh interpretation of the phenomenon (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

A thematic synthesis was used to explore the findings of six qualitative studies in order to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the social phenomenon of friendship among autistic children. The thematic synthesis approach allowed for patterns to be identified across all included studies and themes to be generated to describe those patterns (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Tong et al., 2016). I conducted the coding and synthesis, following the guidelines provided by Thomas and Harden (2008). The guidelines consist of three partly overlapping stages:

- Line-by-line coding of the results of the included studies to produce a bank of initial codes
- Organising of these codes into related areas/categories to produce descriptive themes
- Development of analytical themes by grouping descriptive themes

### **3.2.4 Community Involvement and Positionality**

There was no community involvement in this desk-based research. It must be acknowledged that there are factors and experiences that may have influenced the interpretation of the data. I have experience working with autistic children in mainstream education, which may have made me particularly aware of the difficulties some autistic children face with regard to friendship development and maintenance. Furthermore, my understanding of autism is influenced by the neurodiversity movement



in which autism is viewed as a neurological difference which is a natural and valuable part of human variation. It is possible that this perspective may have influenced the analysis also. While acknowledging this positionality, every effort was made to ensure the data were represented through the lens of the original authors and participants. A more detailed positionality statement can be found in Chapter 4 section 4.6.2.

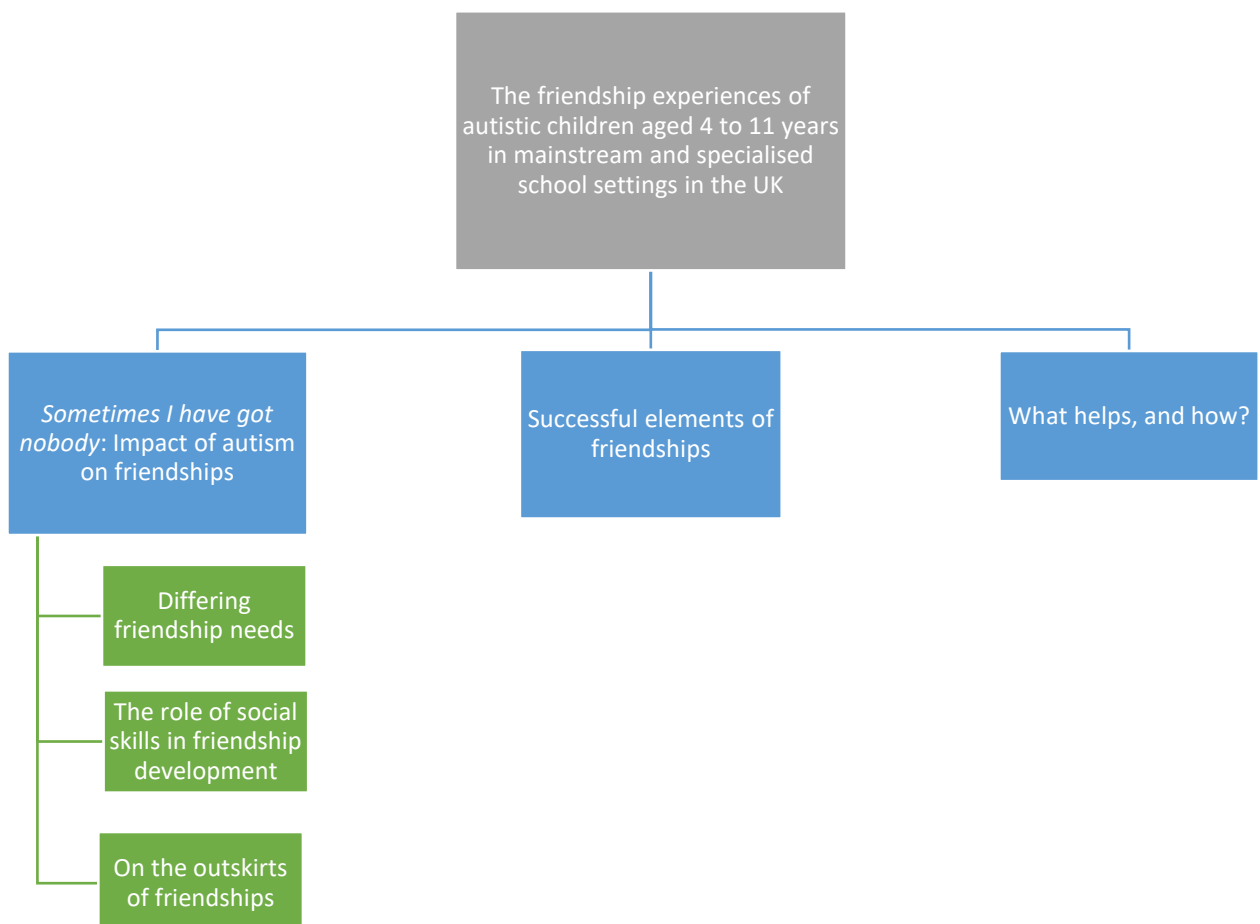
### 3.3 Results and Discussion

Three analytical themes were identified within the six papers included in this review:

- Sometimes I Have Got Nobody: The Impact of Autism on Friendships
- Successful Elements of Friendships
- What Helps, and How?

The three themes and their sub-themes are presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** *Thematic map of Study One Systematic Review analytical themes*



### **3.3.1 Sometimes I Have Got Nobody: The Impact of Autism on Friendships**

Across the six included studies, areas of friendships that were seen as being unique to autistic children were discussed by many. Participants spoke about how differing social skills affected autistic children's ability to make and maintain friendships, the differing types of friendship needs that autistic children were perceived to have, and the challenges some children faced.

#### *3.3.1.1 The Role of Social Skills in Friendship Development*

Participants across five of the studies included in this synthesis spoke about the negative impact of having differing social skills between autistic and non-autistic children had on autistic children's ability to make and maintain friendships (Bradley & Male, 2017; Calder et al., 2013; Conn, 2014; Potter, 2015; Warren et al., 2021). Adults spoke of the challenges surrounding the negative impact their children's social skills had on their perceived ability to make friends and how others' understanding of their autistic child's needs contributed to friendship difficulties.

For those attending mainstream schools, the challenge of having different social skills from their peers was said to be particularly evident during playtime, with autistic children struggling to understand the rules around certain games:

He wants to take part in games and things outside of class but doesn't always understand the rules. For example, if you are out of the game, he thinks he is out forever, and he gets himself in a terrible state (Calder et al., 2013)

This literal take on being out of a game forever may be linked to autistic children's differing levels of pragmatic language and suggests that some may need additional accommodations or support in order to successfully navigate playtimes.

Parents in Calder et al. (2013) study also spoke about how they believed being autistic affected their child's understanding of the subtleties and nuances which often accompany friendships:

Many parents also noted their child's developmental differences (e.g. their level of 'maturity') and how these impacted on their ability to develop reciprocated friendships. In particular, they observed how their child's autism made it difficult for him/her to understand the subtleties of social interactions, which potentially made them vulnerable.

This was echoed by children in the study who reported finding friendships with classmates confusing: "Well, this may be a little weird, but I don't know if I have friends or not. I don't know if children like me, or I like them". Vulnerability is a key concern for parents of autistic children (Sedgewick et al., 2018) and being unable to identify true friendships due to misunderstanding social cues may leave individuals open to victimisation, which could be further amplified by a lack of a supportive social group. Therefore, helping autistic children to understand what harmful behaviours may look like, and supporting them in order to identify genuine friendships, could act as a protective factor as children navigate through school and into adulthood.

Children in resource bases described how difficulties engaging socially via conversations with peers had resulted in feelings of loneliness during break times. Staff members spoke of how they viewed a lack of flexibility, such as the need to play specific games, as a barrier to forming successful friendships by staff members (Conn, 2014; Warren et al., 2021). For others in mainstream school, children were perceived to have difficulties applying social rules: "children showed awareness of social rules but had difficulties applying them (e.g. 'She says all the right things but then you don't see it in practice in the playground')" (Calder et al., 2013) which may also link to feelings of loneliness for those children with a desire to be included in friendship groups. The understanding that autistic children feel loneliness is of importance. Diagnostic criteria tend to emphasise autistic individuals' deficits in social skills and interaction, including a lack of social-emotional reciprocity (APA, 2013). This may lead some to believe that autistic individuals do not experience loneliness. Contrastingly, research shows that autistic individuals may experience loneliness to a greater degree when social interaction

is absent, compared to neurotypical individuals (Bauminger et al., 2003). The experiences reported across the papers in this synthesis highlight that autistic children do experience feelings of loneliness when social interactions are limited or absent, which has implications for interventions and support.

A need for autistic children to be in control of the activities carried out with peers was discussed by adults, but not children, across all school settings (Calder et al., 2013; Conn, 2014; Fox et al., 2023). Autistic children were often reported to have difficulty negotiating or compromising with their peers during interactions, which was perceived negatively by adults. Being in control of situations was not just limited to play time, but also to other activities involving peers such as shared reading (Conn, 2014), suggesting that this need was present throughout not only social interactions but during class work too. Parents also reported that children could be very 'me' centred during peer interactions, which was a source of concern for some (Fox et al., 2023). This constant need to be in control may be a stressor for other children and could reduce the number of reciprocal friendships that children are able to make (Sedgewick & Pellicano, 2019). It is interesting to note that this need to be in control was not discussed by children, which may imply that for them this need/want to be in control was not something they viewed negatively, or perhaps not something they were conscious of.

For some, having neurodivergent social skills was seen as a barrier to friendship development and these participants believed that teaching neurotypical social skills would help to nurture successful peer relationships. In three studies, adults identified teaching neurotypical social skills to autistic children as an important priority that could help to increase autistic children's capacity to engage with peers successfully (Calder et al., 2013; Potter, 2015; Warren et al., 2021). Parents of children attending mainstream school spoke of how those close to children, such as siblings, played a large role in teaching children how to 'effectively' engage with others, suggesting that neurotypical social skills were seen as a priority within these families (Calder et al., 2013). Similarly, in the same study, "one teacher explained that it was sometimes necessary to instruct the child with autism regarding exactly what to say to other children in certain situations",

suggesting that teachers in mainstream settings may also believe that teaching neurotypical interaction skills is important. Explicit teaching of social skills via modelling was also key for those attending schools with resource provision (Warren et al., 2021).

For others, it appeared that less emphasis was placed on the explicit teaching of social skills, yet the development of these skills was reported to have happened naturally through time spent with non-autistic children (Potter, 2015). It was unclear, however, if these were skills that had been developed, or if children were simply engaging in masking behaviours, a common coping mechanism for autistic individuals (Dean et al., 2017). Interestingly, for studies that elicited the experiences of children, they did not comment on the need for learning neurotypical social skills, possibly suggesting that this was not a priority to children, or that they did not recognise a meaningful difference. There are implications which must be considered when teaching neurotypical social skills. It implies that adults believe autistic children's abilities need to be improved or that they would benefit from acting like their non-autistic peers which may have a negative impact on autistic children. Studies have shown that promoting neurotypical social skills may have negative consequences for autistic people's identity development, resulting in autistic people internalising negative perceptions about their diagnosis (Berkovits et al., 2020). Furthermore, the promotion of these skills goes against the neurodiversity movement, which emphasises a need for social change as opposed to changing the autistic individual. It may be more appropriate for neurotypical students to be taught about the differing needs and communication styles of autistic children instead of the responsibility being on the autistic individual. As proposed by the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), social misunderstandings are the responsibility of both individuals and therefore the onus should not be on autistic children to always adapt to neurotypical norms. Instead, teaching peers about neurodiverse ways of communication may help to reduce the challenges faced by some autistic individuals.

### *3.3.1.2 Differing Friendship Needs*

Nuances in autistic children's friendships were a prominent discussion point across five studies (Calder et al., 2013; Conn, 2014; Fox et al., 2023; Potter, 2015; Warren et al.,

2021). Many autistic children across the studies had, or were reported to have, different expectations of what friendships were to neurotypical children (Calder et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2023; Potter, 2015). Across school settings, autistic children were noted not to have 'typical' friendships by parents, and this was perceived to influence the types of friendships children developed: "he's not big on friendships. He doesn't have typical friendships, I guess, being autistic [ . . . ] he's not got that kind of bond with people, with his peers' (Katie)" (Fox et al., 2023). This was echoed by parents in Calder et al. (2013): "All parents viewed their child's friendships with other children to be different in some way". These differing expectations of what friendships look like were only explicitly spoken about by adults in studies. This may suggest that children do not perceive their friendships as deviating from a norm and therefore do not feel the need to report these different expectations.

Although not explicitly spoken about, different expectations of what a friendship is were highlighted by some children who, however, favoured companionship over emotional relationships:

When asked directly about what a friend means to them, the majority of children described friendship largely in terms of companionship (e.g. 'They always play with me', 'Someone that you hang around with', 'We like being together', 'We play games with each other'). (Calder et al., 2013)

Research has shown that autistic children's understanding of friendships often includes behaviours linked with companionship, such as taking part in shared activities (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010), behaviours which are often present in younger neurotypical children (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). This want for companionship over a more complex type of social intimacy was also seen in the importance children placed on gameplay in resource bases (Conn, 2014; Warren et al., 2021), with autistic children highlighting how playing games was the best part of the school day or how being excluded from games made them

sad, not because of the missed opportunity to engage with peers, but because a specific game was their favourite:

(P) Because some people won't allow, because some people don't want to play with me. Sometimes I get too annoying.

(I) You think you're being annoying? How does that make you feel?

(P) Sad. It's because I like to play Doctor Who. (Warren et al., 2021)

Understanding that many autistic children want companionship over a need for sharing emotions with others has implications for supporting children with their friendship development. For example, interventions such as the 'circle of friends' focus on teaching children social and emotional skills using a group of peers as a support network (Frederickson & Turner, 2003). Understanding that children may not necessarily want to build emotional ties with others may mean that more time can be allocated to supporting children to develop game-playing skills and to providing spaces in which companionship can flourish.

Although friendships may be perceived to differ in their nature, autistic children were reported to desire friendships. Teachers across special and mainstream settings spoke about children wanting to be included in friendship groups and how not having friendships was a frustration for them, with one mainstream teacher reporting: "it just really bothers him the fact that he doesn't have a best friend" (Potter, 2015). Parents of those attending mainstream school spoke of how this desire had changed over time: "Two other parents also noted that their child's interest in other children and desire to develop friendships had increased with age" (Calder et al., 2013). Although adults across settings were able to identify this want for friendships, this was not discussed by children. As only two studies reported the questions asked in interviews (Calder et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2023), it may be that autistic children were not explicitly asked about their desire for friendships across the other studies here, or that discussing the topic was not a priority for the children at this time.

For children with successful friendships, adults and autistic children spoke of how they generally preferred to have a smaller peer group (Calder et al., 2013; Potter, 2015; Warren et al., 2021). This preference for fewer friends (between one and four as reported by these studies) was seen across all school settings. Research has identified that autistic children often have a smaller number of friendships compared to their non-autistic peers (Dean et al., 2014; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Given the difficulties autistic children face when navigating social situations, it is unsurprising that having a smaller group of friends is a preference for children across school settings. Furthermore, understanding that children prefer to be in smaller social groups has implications for the use of certain interventions such as the ‘circle of friends’ or peer mentoring (Kasari et al., 2012), which usually elicit the use of peer groups and therefore may be challenging for some autistic children.

### *3.3.1.3 On the Outskirts of Friendships*

Across studies, participants spoke about the range of challenges which autistic children faced when navigating friendships (Calder et al., 2013; Potter, 2015; Warren et al., 2021). Both adults and children reported that exclusion from friendship groups was an area that they struggled with and that this had resulted in feelings of loneliness and upset among children: one autistic child in a mainstream setting stated “they talk in their private little groups and I’m not in it. I don’t really care... I don’t mind if they do that... actually, I get a bit upset” (Calder et al., 2013). Parents in the same study discussed how they believed this exclusion was directly linked to their child’s autism diagnosis, and teachers in resource bases highlighted how exclusions are usually down to children’s behaviour: “He tends to sort of be in their [the other pupils] faces all the time and no one tends to want to play with him” (Warren et al., 2021). Although some schools and parents were clearly focusing on teaching autistic children neurotypical social skills, as discussed above, these reports of exclusion may suggest that this approach is not successful for all children who spend more time with non-autistic peers. Providing more opportunities for children and staff to learn about autism and the ways in which neurodivergent children may differ



from peers may help alleviate these social exclusions and promote understanding across school settings.

Some children attending mainstream school faced difficulties with non-reciprocal friendships and others were perceived to have, or expressed themselves that they had, difficulties with the maintenance of friendships or were often on the periphery of friendship groups (Calder et al., 2013). Parents expressed that their autistic child believed they had friends, but that these appeared to be one-sided:

Six mothers reported that their child had friendships that were either unstable or not reciprocated (e.g. 'He thinks he has a couple of friends ... I wouldn't say that he has a good strong friendship ... whoever he plays with at the time, he calls them his best friend, but there is no real bond'). (Calder et al., 2013)

This lack of reciprocity was confirmed by teachers within the study and is in line with previous research that highlights the difficulties some children face with believing that friendships are mutual. Some autistic children believe their friendships are mutual, but it is apparent that the other neurotypical children do not necessarily consider the autistic children their friends (Locke et al., 2013). Non-reciprocal friendships may be reported by adults, but not children, as a result of the differing understanding of what autistic children believe friendship to be. It could be suggested that if autistic children place an emphasis on companionship and gameplay, then engaging in these activities may be markers of friendships for them, hence the lack of reports of non-reciprocal friendships by children across the studies.

Autistic children and key adults across the studies spoke of the ways in which being autistic impacted children's ability to make and maintain friendships. The importance of understanding that autistic children may have different expectations of what friendship means to them was a key point raised by adults across all school settings; children attending mainstream and resource bases reported that having companionship was a key marker of successful friendships for them. Challenges surrounding the way in

which children interacted with their peers with regard to the need to be in control and to have access to a smaller peer group were also discussed by participants across settings. The difficulties faced in relation to exclusion, which was deemed to be linked to children's autism, were also highlighted by both children and adults in mainstream or resource bases. The desire to have friendships was also raised as a key challenge by adults but not children across all school settings, suggesting that children may prioritise talking about successful elements of their friendships over difficulties within these studies. Finally, the perceived benefits of teaching autistic children neurotypical social skills was raised by adults attending mainstream and resource bases, but not by children or those attending special schools, suggesting that the priorities of autistic children may differ from those of parents and teachers and highlighting the importance of listening to and engaging with children when planning support.

### **3.3.2 Successful Elements of Friendships**

Despite the challenges reported above, many areas of friendships were perceived as being successful for autistic children across all school settings. Children across mainstream and special schools, but not resource bases, were reported to have some successful friendships (Bradley & Male, 2017; Calder et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2023; Potter, 2015). For those children with successful friendships, the relationships were noted to be reciprocal, something which is often seen to be a marker of successful friendships:

When given the option of drawing what he liked about Forest School, Aaron elected to draw Jamil, thereby apparently confirming his nomination of Jamil as a friend. As indicated below, Jamil reciprocated this friendship nomination.

(Bradley & Male, 2017)

It could be suggested that those at resource bases reported having fewer friends due to the nature of being in a provision that involves moving between different learning spaces, possibly reducing the opportunities to form successful friendships. Children in resource bases often spend time in a specialist unit, returning to mainstream classes for some

lessons. Warren et al. (2021) found that this disruption can cause challenges in building relationships for both children and staff members and highlights the need for tailoring support.

For those children who did report having reciprocal friendships, some children's friendships had been maintained over many years:

There is clear evidence that some of Ben's attachments to peers have lasted for considerable lengths of time. By the time of the study, one of Ben's peer relationships with a girl called 'Vanessa', whom he met at his previous school, had lasted for over 3 years. During the interactive photo activity, Ben commented, I still am friendly with Vanessa. (Potter, 2015)

This once again highlights that autistic children can and do have successful and long-lasting friendships and that these relationships can continue after the transition to a new school. The ability for children to make new friends and maintain them was raised by parents whose children were transitioning from their primary setting into a new school; "He made friends instantly which I think is great because that was my biggest worry" (Fox et al., 2023). Understanding that autistic children can and do make and maintain friendships may be important information to share with parents to reduce concern and worry, especially for children who are transitioning into a new setting away from current friendship groups.

However, it must be taken into consideration that peer nominations were used across some studies to confirm reciprocal friendships. Peer nomination is a technique in which individuals identify a small number of peers (usually three to five) that they like most and a similar number of peers whom they like least. It could therefore be suggested that peer nominations provide us with an indication of popularity as opposed to successful friendships (Avramidis, 2010). Given the differing expectations of friendships that autistic children may hold, peer nominations may not accurately reflect the number of successful friendships children have. Speaking directly with autistic children and their nominated

peers may better allow us to understand the reciprocity and importance of friendships within this group of individuals.

The value that children ascribe to their friendships was discussed by both autistic children and adults across studies (Bradley & Male, 2017; Fox et al., 2023; Potter, 2015). Adults reported that children placed great importance on their friendships and when they were unable to access these friendships it caused great distress:

Parents described their children as desperate to see their friends and be back with peers: ‘he was so desperate to be back with his class [. . .] I think [he] just desperately missed them and was desperate to see his friends again’ (Bonnie). (Fox et al., 2023)

This desperation in the above quote suggests that some autistic children do miss and want social interaction with their peers and that friendships are of significance to them. This finding contradicts diagnostic criteria within the DSM-V which suggest that individuals will have “deficits in social-emotional reciprocity” and “failure to initiate or respond to social interactions” (APA, 2013). The evidence presented in this thesis shows that, for some children, social isolation is not something they choose. It is clear here that despite the DSM-V suggesting that autistic children may be unable to engage with, or want social interaction, the participants in the included studies did desire friendships and made efforts to develop them despite finding social interaction difficult. Therefore, providing opportunities for autistic children to engage with their peers and develop friendships, both inside and outside of school, may have implications for better mental well-being (O’Connor et al., 2022). Yet care must be taken, as not all children will want or need the same level of social interaction. Although evidence shows that friendship is important in reducing loneliness and preventing a range of mental health difficulties (Mazurek, 2014), a recent scoping review highlighted how coping with the demands of friendships and social interaction left many individuals feeling exhausted and with heightened anxiety, which may negatively impact on mental health and lead to social avoidance (Black et al.,

2022). An individualised, person-centred approach to support, which incorporates speaking with children about their wants and needs would be one way of mitigating this risk.

Adults in mainstream schools and resource bases reported that children were well-liked by their peers (Calder et al., 2013; Warren et al., 2021). For example, “[Kyle] was very likeable as a person, described in almost wholly positive terms by children and adults alike as someone who was friendly, enthusiastic and funny” (Warren et al., 2021). This reported likability suggests that autistic children may be liked by their classmates, however, likability does not necessarily translate into reciprocal friendships; autistic children report being happy with their relationships, but non-autistic peers reported this differently. As previously discussed, adults often reported the non-reciprocal nature of children’s friendships, but children did not. It could be suggested that being liked by peers is seen as a marker of successful friendship for autistic children, but that adults within the studies have a different understanding of what friendship should be and therefore report these interactions differently, highlighting the importance of including children’s experiences in research of their social networks and friendships.

Navigating the success of friendships was discussed across all studies and all settings. For adults of children attending mainstream or special schools, successes were reported in the form of reciprocal friendships, and children were reported to ascribe value to these friendships. For children attending mainstream school and resource bases, those who did not report two-way friendships were often described as well-liked by peers at school which may suggest a level of companionship was present, thus reducing the impact of challenges on these autistic children. The differing experiences across this review show the importance of speaking with children and key adults about friendships and autistic children’s needs and wants.

### **3.3.3 What Helps, and How?**

Key adults and children across all studies spoke about the needs of autistic children in relation to friendship development and how they believe support could be best implemented. Being friends with children with similar needs was found to act as a

supportive element for some autistic children (Conn, 2014; Fox et al., 2023; Warren et al., 2021). Parents and staff members across all school settings spoke of the way in which having friends who ‘understand each other’ played a key role in the maintenance of friendships:

Knowing their child had friends that understood and shared their experience of having additional needs was a positive: ‘It’s lovely, because they all understand each other, and they just accept each other, and that’s what you need. You just need people to accept you for who you are, and they love you for who you are’ (Sammy). (Fox et al., 2023)

Teachers also reported that children with similar needs were often marginalised by the main peer group. Although this could clearly be a problem, it may mean that autistic children interact with a smaller group of peers who are more like them, which reduces the need to navigate large social groups. Furthermore, friendships between children that are similar (homophily) have been found to be common among autistic individuals (Black et al., 2022) and therefore this preference for friends with similar needs is in line with previous research. It is also likely that children with similar needs may be more understanding of the challenges autistic children are facing, possibly making them more accepting, which is discussed later in this theme. Autistic children may also find communication easier with other autistic children compared to communication with neurotypical children or those with different SENDs, which may be one reason for children’s preference for similar peers.

For others, links between shared interests and successful friendships were spoken about by those in mainstream schools, or those who were in resource bases attached to mainstream schools, but not those within special settings (Conn, 2014; Potter, 2015). Having a shared interest was seen as a way of overcoming some of the challenges children faced with communicating with peers: “Kyle appeared to compensate for what he found difficult in communication by his frequent use of products from media culture, using

dialogue, sound effects and poses that provided a kind of ready-made language in his play and conversations” (Potter, 2015). Research has shown that having a shared interest is often a key marker for friendships and autistic children are more likely to engage in conversations with others if they are known to have shared interests (Ryan et al., 2021). Understanding this need for shared interests has important implications for all school settings. Providing children with a space in which they can explore these shared interests, possibly via a lunch club or afterschool club, may provide a safe space for autistic children to interact with peers and form friendships.

Although shared interests and needs were found to be a supportive element by children, the need for others to have an understanding of autism was a prominent topic among adults in all school settings (Calder et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2023; Potter, 2015; Warren et al., 2021). Staff members spoke of how having children in the class who were understanding and accepting of autistic children’s needs helped to support successful gameplay, with one staff member suggesting that “mainstream pupils should be further educated about autism, believing this was an obstacle for enabling positive experiences for some” (Warren et al., 2021).

Parents also spoke of how they had developed a further understanding of how their child may not require neurotypical friendships, which had changed the way in which they addressed the topic with their children:

I just pushed him last year [to invite children home to play] and then this year, I thought, no ... He might be upset if I am saying all the time, “Have you got a friend? Haven’t you got a friend?” Just bullying him all the time (Calder et al., 2013)

As previously discussed, providing more education surrounding neurodiversity for both peers and adults may be one way to support autistic children in developing and maintaining friendships that they deem to be successful. For example, the Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS) project is a teacher delivered programme which aims

to introduce mainstream pupils aged 8-11 years to the concept of neurodiversity (Alcorn et al., 2021). Focussing on holding a positive attitude towards neurodiversity, the project is currently under evaluation and shows promise with regards to supporting teachers and pupils in their understanding and support of neurodiverse children in the classroom, reducing the need for autistic children to be the ones who change their behaviour.

For others, direct support from adults, specifically the role that parents play, was seen to play a part in friendship development and maintenance (Calder et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2023; Warren et al., 2021). Parents were found to provide support by encouraging children to partake in clubs and providing opportunities to mix with peers both inside and outside of school: “Five parents spoke of supporting their child’s social interactions and friendship development by providing access to structured activities, groups and clubs” (Calder et al., 2013). Staff members in the same study also spoke of how they attempted to provide support for children during school time and primarily mentioned how they did this through encouraging other children to play with the autistic child they support:

Sometimes an adult gives them [other children] a reminder to invite the children into their games. It is possible that they do not invite him into their game as much as they should but I am constantly reminding them as I go through the playground (Calder et al., 2013)

This suggests that adults place importance here on interacting with others, and often appear to feel the need to make sure that autistic children are in contact with their peers in an attempt to promote friendship development. Although research has found that buddy schemes such as peer mentoring have been successful in increasing social inclusion for autistic children in primary classrooms (Kasari et al., 2012), care must be taken when deciding who is a suitable companion for autistic children. Peers must show understanding and be sensitive towards the challenges that autistic children may face to limit the risks of bullying and further exclusion. Furthermore, research has found that that pairing autistic children up with other autistic children may provide an opportunity



for children to build self-confidence, community connection, and self-knowledge (Botha et al., 2022; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). Therefore, schools may benefit from providing the opportunity for autistic children to engage with autism-specific peer support where available.

Although many adults reported that support in schools was available, some children attending mainstream schools or resource bases believed that school support was lacking and could be improved. Some parents said that they “were generally unsure about specific interventions in place, if any, to target their child’s peer interactions” (Calder et al., 2013) and that the focus of school support was on academic achievement and behavioural difficulties as opposed to their children’s friendships; if such support for friendships existed, the schools did not communicate this to the adults. This suggests that home-school communication may be lacking in some schools, even if interventions are in place. Maintaining a strong link between teachers and parents may help to overcome this barrier in communication and help to provide a more comprehensive support system.

One further explanation for the challenges surrounding support may be that teachers do not feel equipped or able to focus on encouraging friendship development due to the time demands of other pressures. Staff members spoke of how they believed there was a need for further understanding of how to use support in class:

One staff member explained how their physical placement within the class will be usually be sat away from their mainstream peers and suggested that an improvement would be for them to sit together: ‘They do feel part of the class, but sometimes it feels a little bit still that we aren’t’ (Warren et al., 2021)

It may be that some staff members believe that by sitting autistic children away from their peers they are better able to provide one-to-one support or space for teaching assistants to be more involved. Such a placement, however, may limit the opportunities children have to interact with their peers resulting in missed chances to form friendships. Isolating autistic children from their peers may also increase their feelings of being

different which may in turn reduce inclusion, especially in mainstream settings. It is clear that the differing wants and needs of autistic students must be taken into consideration when designing support. Consulting children about what, and how, they would like to receive these provisions may help interventions move towards a more tailored support plan and away from the one-size-fits-all approach that appears to be in place across the studies within this review.

Providing support to autistic children was seen as a priority for many across studies and the ways in which these supportive factors could be improved were discussed by parents and staff members who were supporting children in mainstream and resource bases. The need for increased home-school communication was raised by some who were unsure of what support their child's school was offering, and teaching staff suggested that current support structures in classrooms may have room for improvement. Autistic children having friends with similar needs was of importance across all settings, and peers having similar interests was also seen to play a supportive role in autistic children's successful friendships within mainstream and resource bases. Across all school settings, increasing the understanding that peers and adults had surrounding autism was thought to be a way in which friendships might be developed further.

### **3.4 Strengths and Limitations**

This review provides a qualitative synthesis of literature regarding the experiences and perceptions of autistic children and key adults with regard to friendship experiences. The use of a thematic synthesis allowed for shared experiences across six studies to be identified, and new knowledge to be generated, while staying close to the results of the primary studies. These findings may be of interest to stakeholders in the UK including school leaders, teachers, support staff, parents, autistic people, and those interested in inclusive education more generally.

The findings of this review should be interpreted considering several limitations. Firstly, the review focussed only on primary-aged children within the UK. Given that friendships evolve over time, a review that uses a life course approach and takes into consideration the influence of age may be beneficial to understanding the development of

autistic children's friendships more clearly. Furthermore, perspectives from outside of the UK are not included in this review, highlighting the need for research that captures perspectives from different cultures and educational contexts.

Secondly, the low number of studies included highlights a need for further research into the friendship experiences of primary-aged autistic children in order to create a more complete picture of the lived experiences of children, their families, and school staff. Autistic girls were largely under-represented in the included studies and there is a need for future work to focus on their experiences.

Finally, although children's voices were present amongst some of the papers included in this review, few studies explored the experiences of friendships among autistic children and their families who did not communicate verbally or had higher support needs. Future work should aim to prioritise the first-hand accounts of those autistic individuals who are under-represented in the existing literature. This will call for the use of alternative participatory methods to capture the voices and experiences of all autistic individuals.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The findings within this chapter highlight the differing friendship experiences of autistic children in UK primary school settings. It is clear that the experiences of autistic children are perceived differently between not only other autistic children and the key adults in their lives but also between school settings. This review indicates that autistic children have the desire to make friends, with many valuing the qualities of shared interests, companionship, and having a small number of friends. Although many challenges surrounding the development and maintenance of friendships were discussed, it was evident that autistic children can and do make and maintain successful friendships. Autistic children attending special schools appeared to face fewer challenges in this area and received more support. Findings of this review show that autistic children across all school settings spoke of the expectations they had of friendships, which appeared to differ from those expectations of key adults and therefore highlights the importance of including autistic children in the design and implementation of social support

interventions. Finally, the need for more training and education surrounding neurodiversity was called for by many to increase the understanding others had of the needs and wants of autistic children across all school settings.

The next chapter will discuss the methods used across study two, a multiple perspective study exploring the experiences of autistic children, and the perspectives of parents and school staff.

## **Chapter 4: Study Two - Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and discuss the methodology and methods used in Study Two, a multiple-perspectives study. I begin by detailing the ontological and epistemological positions which underpin my philosophical assumptions as a researcher. I then discuss the overall research design and structure of the project. I then go on to describe the materials used within the study followed by recruitment and participants, the procedure for data collection and analyses. Finally, ethical considerations are discussed alongside my personal position with regard to core values and beliefs which may influence my designs as a researcher.

## **4.2 Epistemological and Ontological Positioning**

Research projects are underpinned by certain philosophical approaches and are often said to belong to certain paradigms. These paradigms provide a lens through which to see and make sense of the world, something which is vital throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The following sections reflect on the ontology (the nature of the world) and the epistemology (the way in which knowledge is created) by providing an overview and discussion of critical realism.

### **4.2.1 Critical Realism**

Realist approaches aim to ‘generate knowledge that captures and reflects as truthfully as possible something that is happening in the real world’ (Willig, 2013, p. 15). Realism assumes that processes that are social or psychological in nature exist and can be identified and described by the researcher. Critical realism poses that a single reality does exist and retains a concept of truth whilst recognising that this reality operates independently of our knowledge and awareness of it. Therefore our practices as individuals shape how we experience and know this reality (Archer et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Unlike relativism, critical realism does not endorse the idea of multiple realities but instead conceptualises different perspectives and representations of this singular reality. As a result of these differing perspectives, critical realism ascribes considerable importance to social structures and relationships in the explanation of phenomena in the social world (Buch-Hansen, 2014).

In contrast to naïve realism, which assumes a direct link between the data researchers collect and the reality which is being understood, critical realism identifies that data needs to be interpreted to further understand the phenomena being explored (Willig, 2013). The data accessed is thought to be a participants’ perception of their reality which is influenced and embedded in their cultural context and social structures (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, critical realism aims to ‘dig deeper’ into the experiences participants have shared to provide a situated, interpreted view of reality grounded in participants’ accounts.

Given the above, critical realism allows for research to centre the lived experiences of participants whilst highlighting the cultural and social influences that may underpin these accounts. Therefore, critical realism allowed for the participants in this study to have their experiences amplified, whilst taking into consideration the school structures and neurotypical social norms that may have influenced their day-to-day experiences of friendship development. The understanding that reality is perceived differently by individuals also allowed for the exploration of different perspectives within this study to gain a bigger picture of the friendship experiences of autistic children.

### **4.3 Research Design**

#### **4.3.1 Overall Approach**

The main objective of this doctoral project was to explore how autistic children experience friendships and to gain a deeper understanding of whether these experiences differ between different educational settings in the United Kingdom. To achieve these objectives, the project adopted creative and accessible qualitative data collection methods with a view to ensuring that a wide range of autistic children could access the research project. It was hoped that by using data-collection methods which allowed children to provide responses in a range of ways rich, in-depth knowledge of their experiences could be gained. Alongside children's experiences, the study gathered the perspectives of key adults in children's lives and explored how parents and teachers perceived children's friendships, and whether these perceptions differed from each other, and from that of the child. Data was collected via scrapbooks which were provided to children, parent-led interviews, and parent and teacher questionnaires. The study aimed not only to amplify the voices of autistic children but also to interpret these voices with a view to informing future social interventions.

#### **4.3.2 Listening to Children's Voices Using Qualitative Methods**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989) states that all children who are capable of forming their own views should be provided with the

opportunity to express those views. However, children's voices are seldom heard, especially in the context of SEND research (Rix et al., 2020). It is evident that children are often seen as the object of research, as opposed to active participants, and researchers often opt to use observational data collection methods, or teacher or parent reports, as opposed to exploring the direct experiences of children. Furthermore, research exploring the experiences and views of autistic children and young people is lacking compared to that of their non-autistic peers (Ellis, 2017; Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). It has been suggested that this research is not only lacking in numbers but that poor consideration for the research methods used often results in studies not engaging autistic children in a meaningful way, thus limiting findings (Harrington et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of adapting research methods to ensure that autistic children can discuss their experiences in a way that is accessible to them, and for researchers to listen to this group of individuals to produce meaningful findings.

Listening to autistic children's voices can be facilitated by using inclusive and creative qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is concerned with exploring phenomena. It seeks to understand and interpret the experiences of individuals, or a group of individuals, by gathering in-depth and rich data from which claims can be made (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, although qualitative methods are becoming more prominent in childhood studies, few studies have carried out qualitative research with children with SENDs with some exceptions (Altman & Kanagawa, 1994; Cook et al., 2016, 2018; Hambly, 2018; Howard et al., 2019; Lyons, 2014; Lyons & Roulstone, 2017; Merrick & Roulstone, 2011; Palikara et al., 2009). This may be due to the additional barriers which are often present when using qualitative data collection methods.

Traditional qualitative data collection techniques often heavily rely on the use of oral language. Data is often collected using methods such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups in which participants engage in a back-and-forth conversation with the researcher or other focus group members. However, these methods may not be appropriate when working with autistic children for a multitude of reasons. Traditional methods require children to understand the questions being asked of them, formulate a

response, and accurately express this response to the researcher, tasks which may be especially challenging for those with additional communication needs (Preece & Jordan, 2010). Autistic children often have difficulties with pragmatic language, which may impact their ability to follow the formal rules of conversations, such as turn-taking, and may have differing levels of understanding non-literal language. For example, autistic children may find open-ended questions, such as those used in traditional interviews challenging, and may need to rely more heavily on visual prompts or non-verbal communication than their non-autistic peers. Furthermore, the language barrier faced between researcher and participant may also be mutual, that is adults may use language that children are not familiar with, and children may use language that may not be easily understood by adults, further adding to the difficulty of using traditional methods (Punch, 2002). This is further amplified by the double empathy problem, making communication between adult researchers and autistic children even more challenging.

Methods which aim to amplify the voices of children have begun to move away from traditional interviews and observations towards approaches which require more direct engagement from children (Ellis, 2017). Methods such as drawing, scrapbooks, and digital photographs have been used successfully in research with children with additional needs and with autistic children (Beresford et al., 2004; Ellis, 2017; Hambly, 2014). These methods have also been used as springboards for engaging children in discussions and semi-structured interviews to further explore their experiences (Hambly, 2014), and research suggests that the construction of knowledge through conversations with children about their drawings can allow children to feel empowered and further express their views (Waller & Bitou, 2011). For example, drawings were used to explore abstract ideas with children in a study exploring nationality, providing a starting point for discussion surrounding the European Union and the importance of local associations with the nation, themes which may have been difficult to discuss in traditional interviews without visual prompts (Throssell, 2018). The study emphasised the importance of allowing children to have the space to express themselves in multiple ways and also the



importance of the child's environment on their responses, i.e., being in a familiar, comfortable space.

With this in mind, creative task-based methods were chosen for use in the current study for a number of reasons. Firstly, they can allow children to engage with the research in a way that they feel comfortable with. Providing non-verbal options for interacting with the study, through drawing, crafts, and written responses, autistic children may be better able to access the study, and therefore provide more accurate accounts of their experiences during interviews. As no two children are the same and therefore creating tasks which can be completed in multiple ways allows for the research to be more accessible to a range of individual children.

Secondly, the use of prompts, such as drawings or written words related to the discussion topic, have been successfully used to facilitate rich responses in interviews with autistic children (Danker et al., 2017). As the study aimed to explore children's experiences of their friendships, a topic which may be sensitive for some children and therefore may be a topic that children find challenging to discuss, it was deemed appropriate to provide non-verbal ways for children to express themselves and then use these responses as prompts to further explore these experiences using a semi-structured interview.

Although it is possible to analyse and interpret children's drawings, this was not done on this occasion as it is the meaning the children attached to these drawings that this study was interested in, not the researcher's interpretation of the drawings. Therefore, drawings were only used as child-led prompts during interviews as opposed to being objects of analysis. The responses children gave when asked to talk about their drawings, their descriptions of them, and the memories associated with them were captured during the semi-structured interviews and drawings from scrapbooks were used to illustrate quotations where appropriate.

#### **4.3.3 Remote Parent-Led Interviews**

The choice to use parent-led interviews was partially made as a result of the move to remote data collection following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic

meant that many children were being home schooled and for those who were attending school, access to schools for external visitors was highly restricted which impacted on the overall design of the study. Initially, I was hoping to carry out the interviews myself via Zoom, however, as children were spending a large amount of their time engaging with online learning, I was wary of asking children, and parents, to spend part of their free time in an online interview.

I became aware, anecdotally, that some health services had begun asking parents to interact with their children and video these interactions for autism and speech-language assessments. The success of these assessments led to the consideration of carrying out remote interviews which were led by the parents themselves. Not only did this allow for data to be collected in a COVID-safe way, but allowing parents to carry out the interviews themselves meant that they could do so at a time that was convenient to them and their children. It also allowed for the interview to be paused if children became tired, disinterested, or stressed and resumed at a more suitable time, something that would not have been possible in a traditional interview between researcher and child. Parent-led interviews also provided an opportunity for children to be in a comfortable, safe space with a member of their family which they were comfortable with.

Friendships can be a sensitive topic for some children and discussing such topics with a stranger was likely to be an uncomfortable task for many. Research has shown that autistic children may find engaging in interviews challenging, and that building a rapport with children is key in reducing this anxiety (Harrington et al., 2014). The lack of opportunity to visit children and build rapport as a result of COVID-19 supported the decision to ask parents to conduct and record the interviews. Furthermore, allowing children to discuss their scrapbooks with a familiar adult may have reduced the power dynamic which is often prominent in qualitative research, and may have allowed children to express themselves more freely (Punch, 2002).

There is limited literature available exploring the use of parents as interviewers, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increased uptake of remote data collection methods. Video documenting has been found to be a successful way for

participants to record and share elements of their lived experiences, including everyday interactions (Hensen et al., 2021). Allowing parent participants to be in charge of recording their own interviews with their children allows for interviews to be carried out at a time and at a place that is convenient for them, much like with video documenting. This removes the additional stress for autistic children of being visited in their homes or schools, which may be more prominent with this group than with their non-autistic peers. Furthermore, remote data collection is more efficient than face-to-face data collection and removes the geographical boundaries that would be in place if interviews were carried out in person, allowing participants from across the UK to participate in the study.

Although remote data collection presents opportunities to engage hard-to-reach participants with research, it also comes with some challenges. Firstly, allowing participants to be in charge of their own interviews removes some control from the researcher with regard to which questions are asked during the interview, meaning that participants can deviate from the areas of interest or topics relevant to the research questions without a researcher being able to 'get them back on track'. Secondly, it relies on participants having access to, and the ability to use, technology. Although it is common for individuals to have access to the internet and devices with video recording technology, there is still a risk that those without access who wish to take part are excluded from studies. Lastly, there is a risk that requiring parents to have the ability to carry out the interview and successfully follow the prompt sheet may exclude parents with additional needs or parents with responsibilities which limits the amount of time they have to sit and discuss the scrapbook with their child.

#### **4.3.4 Multiple Perspectives**

Including multiple perspectives in research allows us to explore a phenomenon from different angles (Willig, 2013). It has been acknowledged that different perspectives on the same experience will exist between individuals coexisting in a relationship (Reczek, 2014) and views can be better situated within the social relationships within which they are construed if multiple perspectives are explored (Harden et al., 2010). Therefore,

gathering the experiences of autistic children and their families may allow us to understand the complexities of children's friendships, by looking at how others perceive this experience. Teachers may be in a unique situation to comment on the mutuality of children's friendships as they are with children and their peers throughout the school day whereas parents may be able to offer insights into their children's friendships outside of school and may have knowledge of any difficulties children have expressed having with friends which they may not share with teaching staff or in the study interview.

In the past, triangulation, a strategy which aims to use multiple methods or perspectives, was sometimes used to enhance the rigour of a qualitative study and improve the breadth and depth of the study's findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). However, the use of such strategies to enhance credibility has roots in positivist perspectives and implies that a true picture of reality can be achieved (Varpio et al., 2017). Children likely experience their friendships in ways that do not necessarily map onto teachers' and parents' perceptions of those friendships. Therefore, data was used to explore these different perspectives and capture the diversity of perspectives as opposed to focussing on one representation of children's friendships in line with the critical realism paradigm. Although any similarities found between the groups are discussed, the data was not expected to corroborate what children had expressed in their interviews, and any differences between participant groups helps to support a deeper understanding of the friendship experiences of autistic children.

#### **4.4 Materials**

Taking into consideration the challenges discussed above, this study included multiple ways for autistic children to engage with the research which are discussed below.

##### **4.4.1 Activity Packs**

Activity packs contained materials that children may need to successfully complete the scrapbook. This included a scrapbook, emojis and labels, a glue stick, play dough, and felt tip pens. Included in the activity pack was an information sheet for children which

explained what the study aimed to explore. A parental information sheet, semi-structured interview script, and teacher and parent questionnaires were also included in the pack.

**Figure 3:** *Example of activity pack provided to children in Study Two*



#### 4.4.2 Scrapbooks

A scrapbook was designed to allow children to describe their experiences through drawing, crafts, and/or writing. The scrapbook was designed around the main research questions of the study and contained two sections: 'all about me', and 'all about my friends'. Within the sections were three tasks designed to explore children's ideas of what a perfect friend would look like and their experiences of real-life friends. The activities in the book were reviewed by a colleague with Early Year Foundation Stage SENDCo experience, and a Year 4 mainstream classroom teacher, to ensure that the level was appropriate for the age range. These discussions resulted in the addition of emojis to help

children express their emotions as per the suggestions of the colleague with SENDCo experience. The activities were then piloted with a 9-year-old boy who receives speech-language therapy and is suspected to be autistic. The choice to use a child who was not formally diagnosed with autism was made so that an eligible child would not be excluded from the main study due to piloting. Piloting resulted in the removal of some emojis and labels which were similar in meaning from the pack to reduce the number of choices on offer at the suggestion of this child's parent. The scrapbook can be found in Appendix B.

The scrapbook began with a welcome page which explained to children that the tasks within the booklet could be completed in a multitude of ways, and that there were no right and wrong answers. It also reminded children that they were free to stop completing the scrapbook at any time and that if they did not want to answer specific questions, they were free to leave them unanswered or to come back to them later. There was space here for children to assent to the study by writing their name and drawing a happy face. An instruction page was also included at the beginning of the scrapbook which explained the layout of the activities and reminded children that the scrapbook was aimed at children who may be older or younger than themselves and therefore some tasks may be easier or harder than others.

**Figure 4:** *The welcome page in Study Two scrapbooks*

# Welcome to your Scrapbook!

In this scrapbook we would like to hear all about you and your friends.

This is your book, so you can complete the tasks in whatever way you want to. You can use drawings, write down words and use colours and craft materials.

- There are no right or wrong answers.
- You can stop at any point.
- If you want to pass on a question – you may do so.



If you are happy with everything above please write your name, or draw a happy face in the space below:

The first section was designed so that children could take ownership of the scrapbook. The 'All about me' section invited children to create a profile for themselves and write or draw about their favourite things to do. There was also space for children to pick their own nickname which was used as a pseudonym when writing up the results of the study. For those children who did not provide a pseudonym, a randomly generated name based on the gender their parents provided was allocated to them. Children also had the option to create a profile picture for themselves by drawing a picture of themselves or of something they enjoyed doing.

The second section contained two parts: all about my perfect friend, and all about my real-life friend. There were two tasks which explored the child's perfect friend. Firstly, a blank outline of a person was provided so that children could design their perfect friend. Children were encouraged to use emojis and labels that had been provided (see Appendix C) to help them describe their perfect friend, and were also provided with play dough as an alternative to drawing if they preferred it, i.e. they had the opportunity

to create a model of their perfect friend. The emojis included a range of expressions that could be used to describe different attributes of their perfect or real-life friends and were often used by children to help express how they felt about their friends. Labels included descriptive words or activities that children may want to use when describing their friends in the hope that these would help to prompt further discussion during the interviews.

**Figure 5:** *Examples of labels and emojis provided to children in activity packs in Study Two*

Enjoys reading

Takes turns

Enjoys playing games

Kind



The second task in this section asked children to list three reasons why this would be their perfect friend, and what they would like to do with their perfect friend at school and after school. This task aimed to explore if children's 'perfect' activities were similar to what they went on to report actually doing at school with real-life friends.

The final section of the scrapbook explored children's real-life friendships. Children were asked to pick a real-life friend and create a 'profile' for them, much like in the opening 'all about me' task. This task also asked children what their favourite memory with their real-life friend was, and what was their favourite thing to do with their friend. Finally, children were asked what their friend does when they were sad or angry and



why they thought that they (the child participating in the study) was a good friend to others.

Although the scrapbook was designed so that children could engage with the tasks independently, some prompts for completing the activities were provided to parents in the parent information pack (Appendix D), should their child find specific areas challenging.

#### **4.4.3 Parent-Led Interview Schedules**

Parent-led interviews provided children with an opportunity to talk about their scrapbooks and to further explain their responses to the tasks. Parents were provided with a semi-structured interview script which was related to the activities in the scrapbook and were asked to video or audio record their children talking with them about their scrapbook.

The interview schedule was divided into three sections which corresponded with the three main tasks of the scrapbook: all about me, all about my perfect friend, and all about my real-life friend. Parents were encouraged to ask the questions in as similar a way as possible to those on the interview schedule but were reminded that if their child was unhappy talking about certain tasks, that the question could be skipped. Parents were informed that they did not have to discuss each task in order or in a single sitting, but that they should make sure that all discussions were recorded, even if this meant that the interview came through as multiple video recordings. Sample questions for each section can be found in Figure 6 and the full interview schedule can be found in Appendix E.

**Figure 6:** *Example interview questions from parent-led interviews with children in study two*

**All about me section:**

- This section is all about you. What is it that you're doing here? (in my favourite things to do box)
- Can you tell me why this is your favourite thing to do?

**What do you think makes a good friend?**

- Can you tell me all about your perfect friend?
- Did you pick any labels for this friend?
  - Can you tell me why you think the labels you picked make a good friend?

**All about my friend:**

- This bit was all about a real-life friend. Can you tell me who they are?
- What is your favourite thing to do with your friend?
  - Can you tell me why you like doing that with your friend?

It was also asked that children be visible in the video recording of the interview, if possible, though parents had the option to remain off-camera. Although parents were initially asked that the interview be carried out on video, it was decided to allow those who were uncomfortable being on camera to provide audio recordings only, as the video was becoming a barrier to some children. This was the case for two children in the study who provided audio recordings only at their parents' request.

#### **4.4.4 Parent and Teacher Questionnaires**

Parents and teachers were asked to describe their perceptions of the child's friendships via a questionnaire. Questionnaires were created in Qualtrics and available in both electronic and paper form. The parent questionnaire included a brief demographic section and open-ended questions were used to explore parents' perceptions of their children's

friendships including how the type of school impacted upon their friendships, how they thought their children felt about friendships, and how they felt about their own children's friendships. The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix F.

The teacher questionnaire was designed to be as close as possible to the parent questionnaire to allow for any similarities or differences to be explored. Teachers were asked to demographic information and the same open-ended questions were used to explore teacher perceptions of the children's friendships, how school type may influence these friendships, how children felt about their friendships, and how they felt about the child's friendships. The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix G.

## **4.5 Procedure**

### **4.5.1 Data Collection**

#### *4.5.1.1 Recruitment*

Firstly, an information link and recruitment flyer were circulated on Twitter, and relevant support networks, such as Autistica, were contacted to ask for their support in sharing information about the study with their network. The recruitment flyer can be found in Appendix H. Recruitment via social media was successful in gathering the support of some parent groups and resulted in an uptake of parents whose children were attending mainstream education. Very few parents of special school children were recruited through social media. This may have been due to the research only being disseminated on Twitter, as opposed to other sites such as Facebook, which might have resulted in more community or support groups being reached.

Secondly, mainstream and special primary schools were contacted via email using a pre-existing contact list from a previous study. Three hundred and twenty-six mainstream primary schools and 836 special schools, including pupil referral units, were contacted between the 5<sup>th</sup> of May and the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2021. Fewer mainstream schools were contacted due to the recruitment of mainstream students already being good via social media at that time. Schools were emailed to ask for their assistance in circulating information via their social media pages or newsletter and were provided with an email

template and recruitment flyer to send to parents. Parents who were interested in the study responded directly via the information sheet, which was hosted on Qualtrics, and after providing consent were asked for a suitable address for activity packs to be sent to (see Appendix I). Recruitment information was recirculated on social media from May 2021 until December 2021, when the focus was turned to ensuring those participants who had already received packs were able to return them.

Recruitment via schools posed some challenges. The gathering of school information was time-consuming and although the information was from a pre-existing contact list from a previous study, many details required updating due to staff changes. Although hundreds of schools were contacted, many did not respond, however, special schools were more likely to help circulate the study information to their parents than mainstream settings.

#### *4.5.1.2 Participants*

The sampling method was designed to reach and recruit eligible participants from a potentially hard-to-reach sample. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is able to accommodate a wide range of dataset sizes and compositions and it has been suggested that between 10-20 participants will provide sufficient data to identify themes across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, the aim was to recruit at least two children from each Key Stage 2 year group (i.e. Years 3, 4, 5 and 6), in each setting (mainstream and special), in order to gather rich enough data to explore the experiences of a range of individuals from each school group. In reality, recruitment was much more challenging than expected, particularly in special schools, and although 62 parents signed up and received study materials, only 20 participants returned them, resulting in a higher proportion of mainstream children taking part in the study.

The criteria for participating in the study were as follows:

- Children must be in Key Stage 2 (KS2) or equivalent, age 7-11 years and attending a UK mainstream or special primary school

- Children must have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) and a formal diagnosis of Autism

The choice to require children to have an EHCP and formal diagnosis was made to aid with recruiting well-matched samples from both mainstream and specialised settings, as children with EHCPs have the option to attend either type of educational establishment. Table 2 provides information on participants.

**Table 2: Participant information of autistic children in Study Two**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>School Setting</b>	<b>Scrapbook Received</b>	<b>Interview Received</b>	<b>Parent Data Received</b>	<b>Teacher Data Received</b>
Kursi	7	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Benjy	8	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
J	9	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bella	9	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aahh	9	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yaya	10	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
FreyFrey	10	F	MS	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Newton	11	F	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Sandie	11	F	MS	Yes	No	No	No
Hugo	7	M	MS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
H	8	M	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lennie	8	M	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Loodoluf	8	M	MS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
RNHC	10	M	MS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eli	11	M	MS	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Rickie	9	M	SS	No	No	No	Yes
W	9	M	SS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Cody	9	M	SS	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

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Morgan	10	M	SS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Adam	11	M	SS	Yes	No	No	Yes

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**Table 3: Parent and teacher demographics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Parent Relationship</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Teacher Gender</b>	<b>Teacher Length of Experience</b>	<b>School Type</b>
Kursi	Mother	44	.	.	Mainstream
Benjy	Mother	39	.	.	Mainstream
J	Mother	48	Woman	6	Mainstream
Bella	Mother	41	Woman	2	Mainstream
Aahh	Mother	32	.	.	Mainstream
Yaya	Mother	.	.	.	Mainstream
FreyFrey	Mother	41	Man	18	Mainstream
Newton	Mother	48	.	.	Mainstream
Sandie	.	.	.	.	Mainstream
Hugo	Mother	39	Woman	8	Mainstream
H	Grandmother	64	Woman	11	Mainstream
Lennie	Mother	42	.	.	Mainstream
Loodoluf	Mother	36	Man	9	Mainstream
RNHC	Mother	.	Woman	10	Mainstream
Eli	Mother	50	Woman	7	Mainstream
Rickie	.	.	Woman	10	Special
W	Mother	40	.	.	Special
Cody	Mother	37	Woman	10	Special
Morgan	Mother	36	Woman	2	Special
Adam	.	.	Woman	6	Special

Participants were 19 children aged between 7 and 11 (15 in mainstream education and 4 in special educational settings); 17 parents of the participating children and 14 teachers of participating children. Eleven children were able to take part in the interview and provide scrapbook data, two children provided interview data only and a further six were able to provide scrapbook data but were unable to provide interview data. In addition to autistic children, the study included children’s parents and teachers or teaching assistants.



One teacher questionnaire was excluded as no information on child demographics was provided. For one child, Rickie, only teacher data was returned. As this study did not aim to triangulate data it was deemed appropriate to include this teacher's response.

#### *4.5.1.3 Activity Packs*

Packs were sent to a postal address that parents provided upon signing up for the study and a pre-paid envelope was included for the return of the scrapbook. On occasions where children requested to keep their scrapbook, parents were asked to provide photos of the scrapbook. Three children chose to keep their scrapbooks and parents provided scanned copies.

#### *4.5.1.4 Video data*

Parents were asked to record the interview with their child on a mobile phone or other device capable of recording video and audio. A secure link to the University of York Drop Off service was provided to parents via email. The University of York Drop Off is a file-sharing service which allows for secure, encrypted files to be sent via a university hosted website, meaning that no files are stored on external servers. Files are kept for 14 days on the Drop Off site before being automatically deleted. The service also allows for multiple files to be shared at once, including multiple file formats, this ensured that any interviews that were completed in stages or photos of scrapbooks could be sent in one go. Encrypted files were downloaded upon receipt and stored on a password protected hard drive. No identifying information was stored with the videos and participant ID numbers were used as file names. For one parent who was unable to access the link on their mobile device, the videos were sent via WhatsApp, an encrypted multi-platform messaging app, before being transferred to the password protected hard drive.

#### *4.5.1.5 Questionnaires*

Parent and teacher questionnaires were available as hard copies and electronic copies hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey hosting site. Questionnaires were posted to participants along with the activity pack, and a pre-paid envelope was provided for the return of hard copies.

Parents were asked to give their child's teacher or teaching assistant the teacher questionnaire. The choice for parents to deliver the teacher questionnaire ensured that no additional details on the children's school were collected, aiding with maintaining the confidentiality of any classmates the children may speak about.

## 4.5.2 Data Analysis

### 4.5.2.1 *Choosing Reflexive TA*

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) is an interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis which aims to identify and analyse patterns or themes in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive TA, unlike other forms of TA such as codebook or reliability approaches, highlights the active role researchers play in the production of knowledge, and codes are acknowledged to represent the researcher's interpretations of patterns of meaning across a dataset. It is an inductive approach to data analysis which is well suited to studies aiming to amplify the voices of socially marginalised groups (Terry et al., 2017) such as autistic children, and was therefore deemed the most suitable form of analysis for this study.

Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest a six-phase process when using reflexive thematic analysis. It is noted by Braun and Clarke that the choice to use the term 'phase' over 'step' was intentional as it moves away from the idea that analysis will be linear, clearly segmented, and unidirectional, whereas the process should be seen as progressive but recursive. This means that the phases provided are guidelines and the researcher may need to move back and forth between the phases as the analysis proceeds. The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis are:

1. Familiarisation with the dataset via immersion. This is done by reading and re-reading the data and listening to audio or video recordings to gain a sense of familiarity. Notes relating to any analytic ideas or observations are made in relation to the individual data item and the dataset as a whole.
2. Codes are then developed by systematically working through the dataset. Segments of data that may be interesting, relevant or meaningful to the research questions are identified and are given code labels (analytically-

meaningful descriptors). Codes can be at the semantic and latent level and should aim to capture the researcher's analytic take on the data alongside summarising and reducing content. Coding is carried out on the entire dataset systematically; code labels are then collated, and relevant segments of data are then compiled for each code.

3. Initial themes are generated by compiling codes which share core concepts or ideas. Themes are actively developed and constructed based around the data, research questions and researcher knowledge. Coded data relevant to these potential or candidate themes are then collated.
4. Themes are reviewed and developed to assess the fit of candidate themes in relation to the coded data and the dataset. During review, potential themes may be discarded, split, collapsed together or retained and relationships between themes are considered.
5. Codes are then refined, defined and named ensuring that themes are built around a strong core concept. A brief synopsis of each theme is written, and further refinement may take place if necessary.
6. The analysis is written up in order to present a coherent story about the dataset which addresses the research questions.

Alongside the phases above, researchers are encouraged to use a reflexive journal throughout the research process to note down any initial observations or responses the researcher has in relation to the data and to reflect on and interrogate the research process. This process was started during the study design phase and continued throughout data collection, analysis, and the writing of results. At every stage of the study, a written record of each decision was made and any feelings I had about those decisions were noted. The journal was also used to document any anxieties about the study I had and how my values and beliefs were impacting on the data analysis. I also kept notes on how I believed I was making meaning from the data and included initial thoughts about participants' responses alongside this.

#### *4.5.2.2 Open Science Practices*

Open science (OS) aims to make all elements of research transparent, available, and accessible with a focus on the reproducibility of research. Practices often include sharing data, providing transparent methodology via registrations, and open access publications and pre-prints, the latter two having a growing role in the social sciences (Juros, 2022). OS practices are becoming “good practice” and many journals and funders encourage or require researchers to make data findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR) (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

OS practices can be challenging for those using qualitative methodologies. Given that practices were initially designed with quantitative research in mind, the focus OS has on reproducibility does not align with the epistemology of qualitative research (DuBois et al., 2018). Qualitative data rarely aims to provide generalisability and, given the many ways that researchers may engage with the analysis (Saldaña, 2021), it is unlikely that two researchers would come to the same conclusion even when exploring the same research questions. Therefore, even when qualitative data is shared, replication is unlikely.

However, another key feature of OS is that of transparency, which is something that can and should be central to qualitative researchers' work. Transparency encourages researchers to be clear and open about all elements of their research including design, analysis, and results. One way in which OS encourages transparency is through preregistration which was previously restricted to those carrying out hypothesis-driven research. However, it is now possible, and encouraged, to preregister exploratory studies and analysis plans and specific qualitative preregistrations are now provided. For example, the Open Science Framework (OSF), a free open-source tool which allows researchers and research teams to make projects publicly accessible for dissemination, now facilitates preregistration of qualitative research studies, including registration of analysis.

A further challenge for qualitative research is that the sharing of sensitive data is one that can be difficult to navigate and raises several ethical questions. Although data repositories put emphasis on the anonymisation of data, this is something that can be challenging when working with qualitative data. There is often a large amount of trust

enlisted in researchers when participants share their experiences with us, and although participants may agree during the consent process to share their data and anonymised transcripts, this may not be explained clearly by researchers or fully understood by participants. Even when transcripts are fully anonymised, there is still a risk that participants may be able to identify themselves or identify others, which may cause harm to individuals if the topic of discussion is sensitive. There is also a risk that, when working with individuals under the age of 18, that parents may consent to transcripts of their children being shared without consulting their children, who may not be comfortable with their experiences being shared publicly.

The decision was made that scrapbook data and transcripts from children, parents, and teachers would not be shared on this occasion. Although data could be anonymised, I was concerned that in the future children may be able to identify their data even if names were removed from scrapbooks and interview transcripts. This was especially something which was concerning given that children were too young to provide consent to their data being shared. Teacher and parent data also spoke in detail about specific children and often disclosed sensitive information about child peer relationships and therefore was also not shared on this occasion as it may be possible to link these accounts to example scrapbook pictures and child quotes in the results and discussion.

#### *4.5.2.3 Analysis Process*

Based on the guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2021), the following process was followed. Data from parent-led interviews were transcribed verbatim with utterances and features such as laughter and long pauses being recorded. For those children who had provided video data, any physical acts, such as nodding of heads, were also noted. Written data from parent and teacher questionnaires were digitised via a word processor to aid with analysis. Initial thoughts and observations were recorded during and after each transcription. Two separate reflexive thematic analyses were carried out, one to explore the experiences of children, and another to explore the perspectives of parents and teachers. Analysis began with parent and teacher responses to the open-ended questionnaires, followed by child interview data and each followed the process described

above. In line with OS guidance, the analysis for the study was registered prior to any analysis being carried out and can be found in via this link: <https://osf.io/6dnh8>

## **4.6 Ethics**


### **4.6.1 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical permission was sought through the Department of Education's Research Ethics Committee at the University of York. As the study investigates an area that may be one of difficulty to some participants – experiences of friendships - ensuring that the research process was underpinned by a respectful and sensitive approach was of importance and particular care was taken with regards to consent and child assent. As children participating in the study were under the age of 16, parental/carer consent was sought for both child and parent participation in the questionnaire. Parents were provided with a participant information sheet upon expressing interest in the study (see Appendix I) which explained the purpose of the study, what taking part in the study would involve, how data would be stored, and that participation was voluntary. Parents were also provided with the opportunity to ask any additional questions before agreeing to take part in the study and were reminded throughout the study that they could ask questions at any point. Teachers were also invited to take part in the study and an information sheet was provided alongside the questionnaire. Teachers were provided with the same unique participant ID as parents so that teachers did not need to supply any identifying information. As with the parental information sheet, teachers were reminded that participation was voluntary and that if there were any questions that they were not comfortable answering, to leave them unanswered. As the teacher questionnaire was anonymous and linked only by code number, teachers were informed that returning the questionnaire would indicate consent to take part. This information sheet can be found in Appendix J.

Children were also provided with a child-specific information sheet and asked to provide their assent before taking part in the study via an assent page at the beginning of the scrapbook. The information sheet used pictures and simplified terms to clearly

explain what research is, why I was interested in hearing about their experiences, how long the research would take, and that participation was voluntary, reminding them that they could stop completing the scrapbook or interview at any time. An example from the information sheet can be found in Figure 7 and the full information sheet can be found in Appendix K.

**Figure 7:** *Information sheet provided to children in Study Two:*




**Information sheet for children**

**Study Title:**


**How do children feel about their friendships?**

**What is research?**

Research is a way of finding out answers to questions when we don't know enough about.



**What is friendship?**



Friendship is when you and another person get on and like to play or hang out with each other. This might be someone from your class, someone from where you live or a someone that you know through clubs or gaming.

**Why are we doing this research?**

We know that not everyone has a lot of friends and we also know that not everyone likes to have a lot of friends. We would like to learn more about this by asking how you feel about friendships.

Identifying information remained confidential and was stored on a password protected spreadsheet of which I was the only person with access. A random number generator was used to produce participants' ID numbers which were then used during data collection as opposed to their names and later replaced with child selected pseudonyms once data collection was complete. The data collected was stored in anonymous form, with video data, transcripts, scrapbooks, and questionnaires being identified by the unique ID only. Participants were informed that video and audio recordings would be destroyed within 6 months of data collection being completed; however, anonymised data would be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories. Participants were also informed that anonymised data including drawings or written words, may be used for future research, but that no identifying data would be used. In line with university ethics, a data management plan (DMP) was created using DMPonline, a web-based tool recommended by the university which provides detailed guidance on creating DMPs. The project is registered under reference 66966 and can be found in Appendix L.

There was a risk that some participants may become upset or uncomfortable during the study. For example, during the questionnaire, parents may become upset when discussing any difficulties that their children have with regard to their friendships, or children may become upset or uncomfortable while completing the scrapbook activities or the parent-led interview. I was informed that some interested families had chosen not to participate because of the sensitivity of the issue for their children. Therefore, to minimise this, participants were told in advance via the information sheet that if at any point whilst answering the questions they felt uncomfortable or upset, to stop answering the questionnaire or to skip the question that was causing upset. They were also advised that if at any point during scrapbook completion or the interview, their child became distressed with a task or needed to take a break they could pause or stop the activity. Children were also reminded throughout the scrapbook that there were no right or wrong answers to any of the tasks and that if they did not want to complete a task, they could move on.



#### 4.6.2 Reflexivity Statement

Within qualitative research it is acknowledged that researchers actively influence the research process, contributing to the construction of meaning through analysis and interpretation. The position of the researcher in relation to the participants requires discussion. Reflexivity is the continuous and disciplined process of critical self-reflection, exploring what researchers do, how and why this has been done, and the influences this has on the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Both personal and epistemological reflexivity must be engaged with from the beginning of a research project to ensure that the research is of high quality. This statement attempts to express my position in relation to the research, but reflexivity is woven throughout the analysis, results, and discussion chapters.

Personal reflexivity was engaged with throughout the project. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting on how our own values, experiences, and social identities shape the research and how the research itself may have impacted upon us. It aims to explore and acknowledge the intersecting social positionings that researchers have (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As social positions influence how we experience the world and how we view others may impact on how we engage with research and our data and acknowledging these thoughts and feelings allows us to be transparent about interpretations of the data.

Epistemological reflexivity includes the assumptions that are made through the research about the world and knowledge (Willig, 2013). Engaging with epistemological reflexivity involves questioning how the research questions have influenced the study's findings and encourages researchers to reflect upon the decisions made throughout the course of the research.

It is likely that, as an individual who has worked with autistic children in the past, I had preconceived ideas about the friendship experiences of the children who participated in the study. My time spent working as a teaching assistant provided me with the opportunity to work closely with autistic children, and as someone who also has close friends with younger autistic children, I understand and have experienced the challenges

some children face when making and maintaining friendships, and the upset this can cause to both children and family members.

During my time in the role, I provided support to children with a wide range of needs and spent time working alongside children as they took part in social interventions such as 'circle of friends'. However, I was aware that children and young people often had very little say in whether or not they felt like they needed to, or wanted to, take part in these interventions. These experiences are where my interest in the topic first stemmed from. I felt that children should be spoken to about topics which directly involved them, such as their friendships and their desires/wants for friendships, in more detail before being enrolled into intervention programmes and listening to children became something I developed a passion for.

I also experienced the impact that lack of funding and time has on the support teachers and school staff are able to provide to children. It is therefore likely that I had preconceived ideas surrounding the amount and type of support mainstream schools were able to provide and that support not being available to some children would not come as a surprise to me. To ensure that these assumptions did not influence the data collection and analysis, I remained critical of my own decisions throughout different phases of the research.

Furthermore, the data was viewed through a critical realism lens which acknowledges that individuals will have different perspectives and experiences of one shared reality and that experiences can be understood through interpretation of the researcher (Kourti, 2021). Therefore, although all attempts to stay as close as possible to the participant's experiences were made, my emotional investment in the research topic may have influenced the way in which the data was analysed. For example, although I was not present during data collection, which would have reduced my influence on the data provided by participants, I was still impacted by watching and listening to the children speak about their difficulties at school and their want and need to be accepted by their peers as it sparked memories from my own previous experiences. On occasions where children did disclose their struggles, how this impacted upon me was noted in my

reflexive journal and revisited before the coding of the transcripts began. Alongside the reflexive journal, I used supervisions and discussions with peers to discuss any concerns I had about how I was engaging in the research to ensure that the analysis was centred around the participant's experiences.

Finally, as the project was designed to amplify the voices of autistic children, the main study (Study 2) was designed in a way which prioritised those voices. As a result, autistic children were seen as 'experts' with regard to their own friendships. Practically, this may have compromised analysis as there is a risk that researchers do not go beyond the words of participants who are deemed as experts. This was reflected on throughout the analysis, with child data being revisited multiple times to ensure that a deeper understanding was gained from their interviews that included my own interpretation of these accounts.

#### **4.7 Summary**

This chapter has provided a detailed summary of the methodology and methods for study three. The use of creative, remote data-collection may help to provide an insight into autistic children's experiences of friendships and qualitative surveys with key adults may provide further perceptions of these relationships. The use of reflexive thematic analysis allowed for a rich and detailed exploration of these experiences and the importance of researcher positionality and reflexivity were discussed.

## Chapter 5: Study Two Results – Parent and Teacher Views

### 5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss findings from a reflexive thematic analysis of the parent and teacher questionnaire data. This analysis was designed to address the first part of the following research question:

- How do teachers and parents perceive autistic children’s friendships and do these perceptions differ from each other, and from the perceptions of the children themselves?

The latter part of this question, comparing adult perceptions to those of autistic children, will be addressed in Chapter 8.

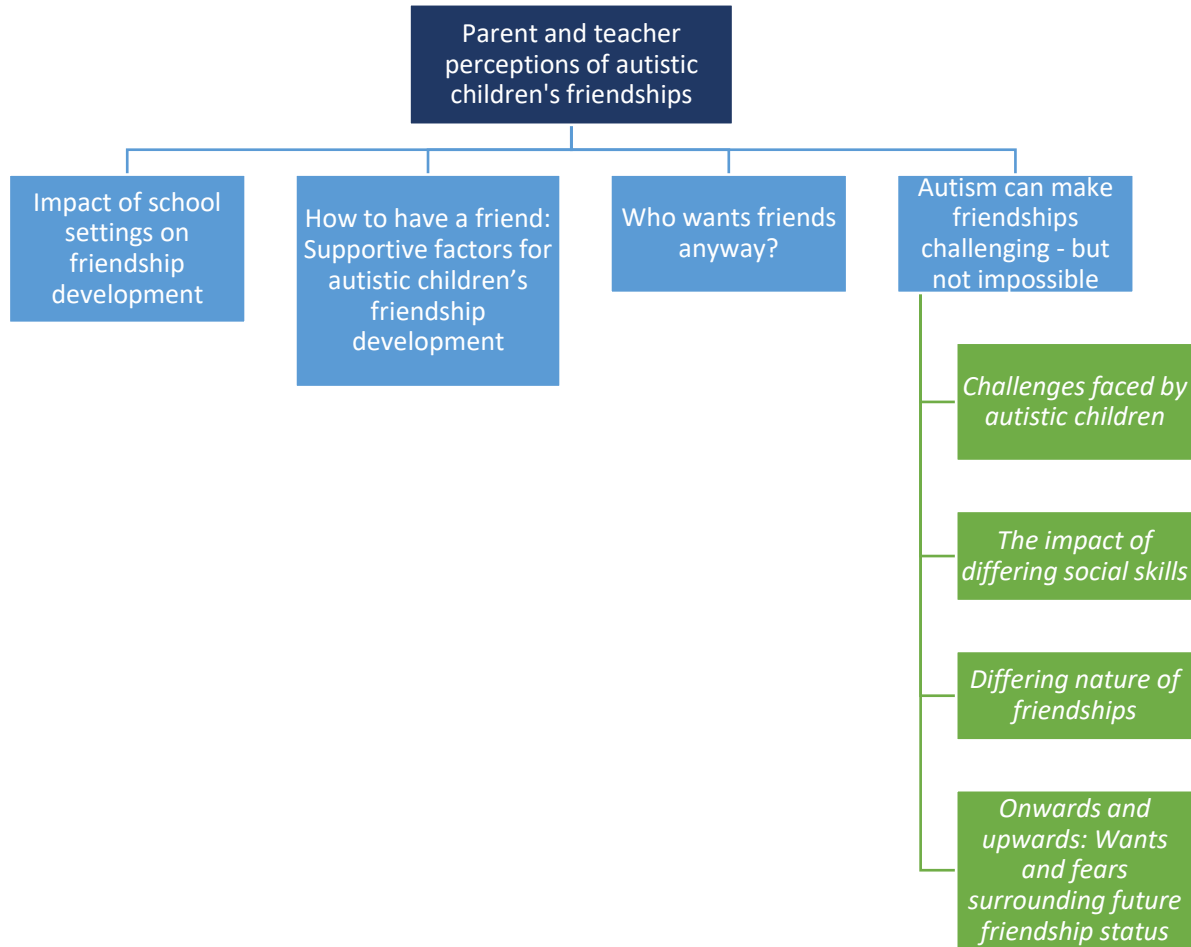
Four main themes were constructed from the data:

1. Impact of school settings on friendship development,

2. How to have a friend: Supportive factors for autistic children's friendship development,
3. Who wants friends anyway?
4. Autism can make friendships challenging – but not impossible.

The four themes are presented in Figure 8.

**Figure 8:** *Thematic map of parent and teacher perceptions in Study Two*



## 5.2 The Impact of School Settings on Friendship Development

The way in which physical and cultural elements of school impacted on children's friendship development was discussed by both parents and teachers. Adults spoke frequently about how school type (i.e., special or mainstream school) affected friendship development.

For both parents and teachers, attending a mainstream school was perceived as having a positive impact on autistic children's ability to engage with their peers and build relationships. Teachers in mainstream schools spoke of how their school provided a suitable environment, and adequate support, for autistic children to make and maintain friendships: "I feel mainstream school is the best place for him at this time, to help him build on friendships" (H's Teacher). This opinion was echoed by some parents who believed that mainstream schools were particularly successful in fostering positive peer relationships. Indeed, for some family members, the choice to attend a mainstream school was intentional as they believed it was important for their children to have the opportunity to interact with neurotypical children:

I wanted H to experience mainstream school and I'm glad he has. He sees how neurotypical children react to each other and I do think it's helped him socially [...] He understands what friendship is and likes to join in. I think mainstream helped with that (H's Grandmother)

This suggests that some adults in this study believe that the way neurotypical children make and maintain friendships is a skill they wish to encourage in autistic children and that by engaging with non-autistic peers autistic children's social skills may develop further. This idea, that neurotypical children may act as role models for 'appropriate' social interactions, has been highlighted to be of importance to teachers and parents previously, and something which is often taken into consideration by parents when deciding on school placement (Waddington & Reed, 2006).

However, for other parents, mainstream school was seen to have a negative impact on their child's ability to develop friendships. YaYa's Mum spoke of how being in a mainstream setting made her daughter stand out from her classmates:

Yes, because my child has social and communication and learning difficulties it makes her less favourable in a class with neurotypical children who are more mature and don't have similar needs [...] I think it has been difficult for our daughter because there are no girls in her class with similar needs who have social communication difficulties like her, so she stands out.

For these children, a lack of similar needs, and the differing abilities of children in the classroom, appear to act as a barrier to making and maintaining friendships in mainstream schools, from the point of view of some of the adults around them. The importance of being able to interact and work with those at a similar level, as opposed to those of the same age group, was something which staff at special schools highlighted as a facilitator for child relationships: "Yes, as they can make friends with peers who are at a similar level to themselves" (Cody's Teacher). This suggests that the concerns some parents had surrounding ability levels may be identified and reduced in some special schools which have more flexibility in the way they structure class cohorts.

Other parents also spoke of how attending mainstream school was challenging for their autistic child and how this was having a negative impact on their friendship development. This was not necessarily because they were standing out 'from the crowd' as discussed above, but because they were being overlooked by staff members due to being seen as capable academically: "As Bella is verbal and very good academically her anxiety and social struggles are overlooked in mainstream school" (Bella's Mum). This may highlight a lack of understanding in some staff regarding the individual needs of autistic children and their want or need for additional support. Previous research has highlighted that many parents of autistic children in mainstream provision are unhappy with the understanding staff members have of the nature of their children's needs



(Whitaker, 2007). It is possible that children who are seen as ‘more able’ are losing out on much needed emotional support at school due to this lack of awareness and may be missing out on friendship opportunities as a result.

For some children attending a special school, adults believed that the setting had a positive impact on their child after having experienced difficulties in a mainstream school:

Absolutely yes. My son previously attended a mainstream setting and was bullied and often alone [...] in the current special school setting my son is accepted for who he is and there are shared interests, so he has increased his confidence and social skills (Morgan’s Mum).

This is in line with research which has highlighted that autistic children are more likely to experience bullying than their non-autistic peers (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015) and that the prevalence of bullying is higher for those attending mainstream settings (Rowley et al., 2012). A potential reduction of peer difficulties in special schools may occur for a number of reasons. For example, staff may be more likely to be aware and attuned to bullying behaviours due to smaller class cohorts, a higher ratio of staff to students, and continual supervision throughout the day (Van Roekel et al., 2010). It is also likely that staff have received more tailored training compared to their colleagues working in mainstream schools, which may make them better equipped to deal with problems before they escalate.

Although many adults spoke of how school type was impactful for friendship development in both positive and negative ways, for others, school type was deemed to be unimportant. In some cases, adults believed this was because children would adapt to any setting: “I don't really know if it would make a difference, I feel he would still have the same kind of friendships wherever he attends” (Hugo’s Mum), whereas for one parent, school type was unimportant due to ongoing difficulties across settings: “Not really. On changing school, the problems with peers are the same” (Newton’s Mum).

These experiences were only shared by adults of children who were attending mainstream education. This may be because parents of autistic children attending special schools have made a proactive choice to seek alternative schooling for their children and may therefore believe that the school type does play an important role. This may also be the case for teachers who have made an active decision to work in an alternative provision.

Although teachers had differing opinions on whether school type was important for friendship development, many agreed that school culture was something that played a part in successful peer relationships. Teachers at mainstream schools, but not teachers at special schools, spoke of how having an inclusive school ethos that provided a nurturing environment was more important with regards to building friendships than the specific school setting: “Yes, depends on cohort, community, values of school, adults and their collective vision for pupils. [It] depends if [children are] treated as individuals. This helps pupils feel valued, important and a key 'cog' in running of the class” (FreyFrey’s Teacher). This highlights that some teachers in mainstream schools place importance on working with autistic children as individuals, and it could suggest that they are aware that tailoring the environment in a way which makes children feel included may mean they are better able to flourish. Teachers in special schools did not discuss the importance of having an inclusive school ethos. This may be due to the way in which special schools operate, with inclusivity and tailored support being something which is woven into the structure of special schools and therefore goes without saying.

A physical aspect of school settings that adults spoke of was class size. For some parents of children attending mainstream, they noted that a perceived increase in class size over the years was something their child had found challenging and believed that this had a negative impact on their ability to form new friendships: “Yes, when Bella moved to her current school to start year one there were 20 in the class, this is now at least 30. Undoubtedly she would be better in a smaller group setting” (Bella’s Mum). This opinion was echoed by RNHC’s Teacher: “I think a much smaller school would help as they may find it tricky working out the finer points of friendships and how their

friendships may vary at times”. This suggests that adults are aware of, and concerned with, autistic children’s ability to form friendships in larger class cohorts, and that this may be a consequence of staff members not having enough time to provide tailored support in mainstream settings. The concerns surrounding class size were not raised by adults associated with children who attended special schools, suggesting that the smaller cohorts in these settings may provide a more suitable environment for some autistic children to socialise.

Many adults believed that schools providing support for children to make and retain peer relationships played an important role in building successful friendships. Being encouraged to interact with others and take part in group work were deemed to be important facilitators, and some spoke of how having support would make the task of having friends a possibility for those attending mainstream settings:

I don't think it's impossible to have friendships in a mainstream school, but it does depend on how supportive and inclusive a school is. How willing they are to put in the provisions to support that child and meet their needs (YaYa’s Mum)

However, the negative impact of not having access to this support was a common point of concern for parents. Parents of children attending mainstream settings, but notably not their teachers, spoke frequently about how they believed their children were not being listened to in their current setting and that this had resulted in a lack of support, which in turn negatively impacted on children’s ability to form and maintain friendships. Bella’s Mum spoke of how her daughter was not accessing the support she needed at school as a result of not being listened to, which was impacting her friendships:

I encourage her to let adults at school know if she is upset or unwell, but she feels she will not be listened to so tries to get through the school day, she then comes home and gets upset [...] Bella finds friendships at school hard as she does not have the emotional support there to manage the social minefield

Others spoke of how it was not a case of being unable to access support, but that there was no support available for children in their school to access: “No adult intervention in the playground, she is pretty much left on her own to deal with friendship issues and only intervene when there is a complaint by another child's parent” (YaYa’s Mum).

The topic of school support was only discussed by parents and teachers of children attending mainstream settings, and the difficulties with accessing it were solely spoken about by parents. This suggests that parents are concerned about the level of support available to their children in their current mainstream school and, even if support is available, some children may choose not to ask for help as a result of not feeling they have an adult in school who understands and will listen to them. It is possible that parents and teachers of children attending special schools may not have felt the need to discuss school support as this was not something that was acting as a barrier to friendship development. As previously discussed, class sizes in special settings are often much smaller than those in mainstream schools, and the ratio of adults to children is much higher, therefore parents and teachers may feel like the ability for children to access support was adequate in these settings. Furthermore, no teachers spoke about difficulties in accessing support for children. This may suggest that some teachers in mainstream schools are unaware of the challenges that the autistic children they work with face when trying to access support, and that better communication between home and school may be needed to overcome these barriers.

Parents and teachers of autistic children attending both mainstream and special schools spoke about the impact that school settings have on friendship development. Parents of children attending mainstream highlighted the need for accessible support for children and the importance of their children feeling like they are being listened to by staff. Mainstream teaching staff discussed how providing an inclusive school ethos may be beneficial for children’s friendships, and all adults across school settings discussed the role school type played in facilitating, or hindering, friendship development and maintenance in autistic children.

### 5.3 How to Have a Friend: Supportive Factors for Autistic Children's Friendship Development

Many adults spoke of supportive factors they believed to help build and maintain friendships for autistic children. Adults across both school types believed that peers having similar needs was a facilitator of successful friendships in autistic children: "She has one friend who has autism and severe PDA, they get along very well. My child is always checking her friend is ok as she realises that she struggles" (FreyFrey's Mum). This supports the importance of homophily, the idea that it is important for children to have peers they believe to be similar to themselves (Hoffmann et al., 2020).

For others, having similar interests was deemed important by adults in facilitating successful friendship development. These shared interests had supported the maintenance of friendships and the development of social skills, and parents believed that shared interests had led to their child being valued by current friends: "Ok, his actual friends are good kids, he has stuff in common, they value my son and enjoy his company" (RNHC's Mum). Furthermore, not having a shared interest had resulted in some children being left out of certain peer groups:

This class cohort seems to want to only play football at break time which Loodoluf doesn't want to join in. He is then left on the outskirts of the playground with other children who also find it hard to socialise (Loodoluf's Mum)

Research has found that many autistic individuals see shared interests as a requirement for friendship success. For example, autistic adults report that time spent with others who share similar interests often means that social differences and social norms become less of a concern, as the focus is on the common activity (Sosnowy et al., 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that autistic children are more likely to begin conversations with others if they are aware of a shared interest (Koegel et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2021). Having a shared interest may act as an entry point for autistic children to begin conversations with others as it allows conversations to be object/task-focused as opposed to focused on personal elements (Ryan et al., 2021). This conversational entry point may allow children

to engage with peers without the support of adults which in turn may help to reduce some of the stigma associated with having social situations preorganised and facilitated by adults.

The need for other people to understand the needs of autistic children was also perceived to be a supportive element by many adults. Teachers believed that having staff that were understanding of children's needs helped to support the development of positive relationships: "Some schools and teachers are very welcoming and open to SEND children, others can have a very negative approach and this can have a very negative impact on the child's self-esteem and their ability to form strong, positive relationships" (Loodoluf's Teacher). Others highlighted the importance of having peers who are accepting and understanding:

The child I support has a very supportive and understanding class who include him in all lessons [...] I feel the child I support is a well-liked member of the class and whole school community. Everybody is accepting and understands his needs (H's Teacher)

This was echoed by parents of children attending both school types, who also discussed the importance of having staff and students who were understanding of their children's needs and how that understanding may lead to better pre-emptive support: "Undoubtedly she would be better in a smaller group setting with staff who understand her needs and can anticipate the social support that she needs" (Bella's Mum). These perceptions highlight the importance adults place on individuals, both adults and peers, being accepting of those who are neurodivergent and that they believe this plays a key role in supporting friendship development. Research has shown that increasing people's knowledge of autism can reduce stigma and negative attitudes towards autistic individuals (Jones et al., 2021; White et al., 2019). Therefore, increasing awareness of autism in schools, for both staff and pupils, may help with friendship development in autistic children by promoting acceptance and understanding (Crompton et al., 2023).

Adults reported that consistent peer groups were perceived to be a supportive factor for some autistic children and having a regular group of peers allowed children to explore friendship groups in an environment that was familiar to them: “As he has been in the same school for many years (since reception) there are a few children that 'protect him'” (RNHC’s Mum). Autistic individuals often find change and new social interactions to be challenging. Having consistent peers in class, even if these peers are not playmates, has been found to be comforting to autistic children and may provide a stable and familiar environment in which they can explore friendship development (Fox et al., 2023). Being aware of this need for a consistent peer group has implications for transition support for children moving up to secondary school or into a new school setting.

Some parents spoke about how they believed their children had developed successful friendships and for those children that had formed friendships, these friendships were not always something that happened in person. Some parents spoke about how their children had found online gaming to be one way that they could engage in successful new friendships: “He plays online games and has some 'friends' online. They actually seem to play well, he usually plays with the same few” (H’s Grandmother). For others, gaming was a way that existing relationships were supported: “She was very close to her male cousin of same age (he moved to Australia four years ago but they still play Minecraft online together and seem to still have a great connection)” (Benjy’s Mum). Online gaming may act as an avenue for social interaction and provide an opportunity for autistic children to speak with others who share the same interests which, as discussed earlier, is something adults believe to be important to friendship development. There is limited research into the online gaming experiences of younger autistic children, but research into the experiences of autistic adolescents has found that engaging in gaming was a preferred method for friendship activity (O’Hagan & Hebron, 2016; Sundberg, 2018) This suggests that online gaming platforms may provide an environment for children to not only meet new individuals and form friendships outside of the school setting, but a way in which existing friendships can be maintained.

Adults spoke of how supportive and inclusive environments were facilitators to autistic children in the development and maintenance of friendships across all settings and that having staff members and peers who are understanding of their needs was beneficial to all. In line with previous research, parents of those attending mainstream schools spoke of how online gaming had supported friendships in their autistic children and others across all settings highlighting the importance of having shared interests. These findings suggest that autistic children in all settings can make and maintain friends if provided with tailored support, and that this support may need to differ between school types.

#### **5.4 Who Wants Friends Anyway?**

Many adults spoke about autistic children's motivation to have friends, and their perceptions of children's friendship status, including the quality and quantity of children's current friendships.

For some children, adults reported that successful friendships had been established both inside and outside of the school environment. Many adults across all settings stated that they believed children had successful friendships: "I feel that Bella has a good group of friends that are all understanding of her needs. She can talk and share her feelings and join in games" (Bella's Teacher) and of how friendships were also formed outside of school, through shared activities: "She attends a climbing class outside of school where she didn't know anyone. It took a good few months but she seems to have found two friends there now" (Benjy's Mum). This links back to how adults in this study, and previous research, suggest that shared interests can be a supportive factor for autistic children, leading to successful friendship development in some cases.

However, not all children were considered to have successful friendships and some were reported to have no friends at all:

My child has struggled with friendships and couldn't identify a friend in her class. She doesn't feel like she has any close friends and couldn't talk about anyone that she works with. She explained that she doesn't work with anyone (YaYa's Mum)



The absence of perceived successful friendships was discussed by parents but not by teachers. This may be because parents are more invested in their children developing and maintaining successful friendships compared to teaching staff. Furthermore, parents are more likely to be aware of the absence of friends due to children not socialising outside of school. However, it could be suggested that these autistic children do have friendships, but that these friendships are only at school, which explains why teachers did not discuss children's lack of friends. Given that children are less likely to talk about their friendships unless prompted (Fox et al., 2023), it could be that autistic children have successful friendships, but parents are unaware of these relationships due to them being in a setting away from home that is not usually occupied by parents. Alternatively, teachers may report friendships that are in fact not deemed as friendships by children, highlighting the importance of including children's voices when researching such phenomena.

For those who had developed friendships, adults spoke about how they believed autistic children, including their own in the case of parents, ascribed value to their current friendships. Some discussed how children seemed happy with their current friendships: "I think that they appreciate their friends and treat them with respect. They enjoy their company and would miss them if they didn't have them" (FreyFrey's Teacher). Others spoke of the importance that children placed on their friendships: "I think he feels that they are really important" (Loodoluf's Teacher), and the enjoyment they gained from being with their friends: "She feels very comfortable with her close friends and loves spending time with these children" (Benjy's Mum). This suggests that autistic children can and do have successful friendships that they deem to be worthwhile. However, although teachers from both school types spoke of how the autistic children they supported had friendships, only parents of children attending mainstream schools spoke of their children ascribing value to this. This could be because, as previously discussed, parents who have actively decided to place their children into a mainstream environment may have done so with the intention of encouraging interactions with non-

autistic children and are therefore more conscious of their child's friendships and relationships than those attending special schools.

Parents, but not teachers, of mainstream girls spoke about the need that their children felt to 'fit in' with their peers at school. For some, the choice to attend a mainstream school was a result of children themselves expressing the want to fit in with other children: "we have had to balance up our options available and her wanting some normality and to 'fit in' with the other children in her village" (Bella's Mum). For others, this need to be like their peers was an additional stressor that had to be navigated at school and led to masking: "She is doing things that aren't intuitive or easy for her. It's mentally exhausting trying to keep up with her peers and sometimes she is unable to continually suppress her natural social reactions" (Yaya's Mum). Autistic girls have reported differing experiences to autistic boys when navigating social spaces at school (Cook et al., 2016, 2018). Furthermore, autistic girls have been found to be more likely to conform to the social group norms of neurotypical groups by engaging in masking to hide their non-conforming friendship behaviours (Kreiser & White, 2014). Therefore, in line with previous research, it could be argued that autistic girls in this study were seen to be more concerned with, and motivated to, fit in with their non-autistic peers by parents than their male peers.

Some parents discussed how they felt their children had a want for friendships in their lives. Some children were perceived as being desperate to have friendships, highlighted by Newton's Mum: "Newton has a huge heart and she wants to have friends that she can trust and enjoy", whereas others observed conflicting feelings about making new friendships: "Often he will say he would rather not make friends, but equally he craves having a 'best mate'" (RNHC's Mum). Some children appeared indifferent to having close friends, but still enjoyed being included in activities: "H enjoys playing with others but it's often on the edge of a group. I don't think it bothers him as long as he is included somewhat" (H's Grandmother). The large variety of responses here shows the heterogeneity of experiences, and the different values autistic children are reported to place on friendships. Research has shown that the motivation and type of friendship need

differs not only between autistic children and their non-autistic peers, but also between genders within the autistic community (Sedgewick et al., 2019; Sedgewick et al., 2016). Girls have been found to place more value on neurotypical friendship styles, and their motivation to make friendships was found to be similar to that of non-autistic girls. However, boys have been found to report less motivation for social contact and to express less concern with making and maintaining friendships, relative to non-autistic boys, but also their female autistic peers. Parents in this study highlight how these differences are apparent in their perceptions of their children's friendships, suggesting that autistic girls may benefit from differing kinds of social support from their male peers.

Many adults also discussed the feelings that they themselves felt when reflecting on children's friendships. Parents spoke about how they were saddened by their child's lack of friends: "It saddens me that Newton struggles so much with friendship. It's heart-breaking that she is sometimes manipulated by her peers" (Newton's Mum) and how they had concerns about their child's current friendships: "He has good friendships in school but I worry about friendships out of school" (Morgan's Mum). Teaching staff spoke more commonly of being happy with the children's friendships: "I'm happy that he has friends that he can play with and look forward to seeing at school and out of school" (Hugo's teacher). Parents of autistic children have been shown to be more concerned with their children's peer relationships compared to parents of neurotypical children or those with other SENDs (Lindsay et al., 2016). Therefore, it could be that parents are in a better position to speak about friendship concerns than teachers as they may pay particularly close attention to their child's friendships, who may only see a small snapshot of children's interaction with peers in the classroom. It may also be that parents are thinking about the longer-term future of their children and how lower quantity and quality of friendships may impact on their child going forward, a concern that may not be shared with school staff. Therefore, parents could report being less happy with friendship development than teachers, even if children do appear to have successful or at least functional friendships.

Autistic children were perceived to have varying opinions regarding the want to have friends. For some, especially autistic girls, there appeared to be an intrinsic want to have friends and to be liked by their peers at school and parents reported that the need to fit in was of great concern to their children. This experience was not perceived to be shared by many autistic boys who appeared to be less concerned with the need to fit in but were still motivated to have friendships in some form. Teachers in the study appeared to be more satisfied with the friendship status of the children they supported compared to parents, many of whom expressed concerns, highlighting the importance of obtaining and exploring multiple perspectives in research surrounding friendships.

## **5.5 Autism Can Make Friendships Challenging – But Not Impossible**

### **5.5.1 Challenges Faced by Autistic Children**

The impact that being autistic had on children's ability to make and maintain friends was discussed by adults of children attending all settings. Many parents and teachers spoke of the challenges they perceived as being specific to autistic children, including the difficulties many had with solving disagreements with their peers without the need for adult support, which may negatively impact on friendship development:

Morgan is very good at taking turns (after a lot of practice) but would not be able to resolve disagreements without adult support. He is very, very stubborn, especially when he believes someone else's view is wrong or if he thinks he's right (Morgan's Mum)

Some children were also unable to take turns with their classmates without support: "My child is unable to solve disagreements and take turns without adult support. When there is no support my child struggles, gets very upset and can't cope" (YaYa's Mum). For others, the challenges autistic children had with turn-taking and conflict resolution impacted on gameplay, and this resulted in some children withdrawing from social

groups: “If other children are not taking turns or playing ‘fairly’ she will get very frustrated/upset and withdraw” (Benjy’s Mum). Difficulties with turn-taking and resolving disagreements have been highlighted in previous literature as a barrier for some autistic children when engaging with their peers (Sedgewick & Pellicano, 2019). Understanding that adults are able to identify these challenges at both home and school may mean that earlier support which targets these skills could be provided which could reduce conflict and increase positive peer interactions for children.

The difficulties children were facing with their peers, and the upset that this caused, was also frequently spoken about. Some children were reported to be experiencing peer difficulties at school which reduced their self-confidence: “Children have laughed at her asking to join in and ran away, this upsets her and knocks her confidence” (Bella’s Mum). It could be suggested that some children who are keen to try to engage with their classmates may be deterred from doing so as a result of negative experiences. Understanding that negative experiences may be one of the underlying causes for autistic children avoiding social interaction may help adults to identify appropriate sources of support.

However, caution must be taken when implementing interventions as some parents reported that their children were experiencing peer difficulties as a result of their school using a peer mentoring system:

However, because it is a fairly large school they are not attentive enough to pair him with the most suitable people. Sometimes he is paired with kids that dislike him or bully him and he struggles to stand up for himself (Lennie’s Mum)

Pairing children with peers, also known as peer mentoring or peer support, is an intervention in which autistic children are paired up with another, usually neurotypical, member of their school to promote inclusivity and provide opportunities to develop supportive relationships (Repper & Carter, 2011). Research suggests that peer support programmes are successful in increasing social inclusion in primary classrooms (Kasari et

al., 2012). However, ‘peers’ are often non-autistic classmates, contradicting the underlying purpose of peer support – that shared experiences can help to form the basis of relationship development (Sunderland & Mishkin, 2013). As shown by Lennie’s Mum, care must be taken by staff members when deciding who is a suitable ‘buddy’ for autistic children. Peers must be understanding and sensitive towards the challenges that autistic children may face as peer mentoring has been shown to be effective when the social support experienced is reciprocal (Bradley, 2016). Furthermore, recent research has highlighted that pairing autistic children up with other autistic young people may provide a space for pupils to interact without having to mask natural behaviours and may provide children with the opportunity to build self-confidence, community connection, and self-knowledge (Botha et al., 2022; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). This could suggest that schools may benefit from providing the opportunity for autistic children to engage with autism-specific peer support, though the needs and preferences of individual pupils will need to be at the centre of this support for it to be successful (Crompton et al., 2023).

Adults of those children attending mainstream school discussed how the children were aware that they were ‘different’ from their classmates which caused anxiety around making and maintaining friendships: “Friendships are a constant source of anxiety because he realises he is not like other children his age” (RNHC’s Mum), a theme that was echoed by RNHC’s teacher: “He thinks the children do not give enough attention and thinks that they do not like him and blames his autism for this. He finds it difficult to accept that the children just accept him as he is”. Although both parents and teachers discussed the difficulties associated with ‘being different’, these perceptions appear to differ from one another. Parents spoke of how the friendship challenges their children encounter are very real experiences for them, and something they, as parents, have concerns about. Teachers, however, appeared to prioritise their own perception of these difficulties, highlighting that the children in class are accepting of autistic children. In cases where children do not feel accepted by peers, teachers may misunderstand the children’s perspective. For example, teachers may be basing an assumption of acceptance on superficial cues, such as the absence of bullying meaning that a child is accepted, or

that sitting with peers is a sign of friendship. This misinterpretation of cues may result in autistic children not feeling heard, a problem raised by parents earlier in this chapter which resulted in children not accessing appropriate support.

Parents described how they believed their child's want for friendships, and worry around losing friends, had resulted in heightened anxiety and loneliness: "sometimes she feels anxiety and loneliness in the process of maintaining friendships and the desire to have them. She is afraid to lose friends and feels lonely when she is rejected or excluded" (YaYa's Mum). This suggests that some autistic children do want to make and maintain friendships, but their worry surrounding losing these relationships may act as a barrier. This may limit their want to access the peer interactions needed to build successful friendships resulting in deeper feelings of loneliness, a finding consistent with previous literature (Bauminger et al., 2003). Providing tailored support for autistic children to maintain friendships may help to lower the worries surrounding loss of friends and in turn support children to be less anxious about engaging with peers and reduce loneliness.

### **5.5.2 The Impact of Differing Social Skills**

Some adults felt that the child's understanding of social networks and the complexity of friendships acted as a barrier to friendship development: "Our child can get annoyed by her friends' unpredictable behaviours, such as suddenly leaving a friendship group or jumping into another friendship group. This annoyance reflects the difficulty our child experiences predicting others' behaviours" (YaYa's Mum). This was echoed by J's Mum: "she does not understand the complexity of friendships and how they could impact her in the future". Navigating complex social networks may be a source of anxiety for autistic children and it is apparent that adults of the children in this study are aware of these challenges and recognise their importance. As social network structures have been found to change with age, it could be suggested that the more complex these structures become, the more anxious autistic children may become as a result of these changes as their expectations of friendships may no longer align with those of their peers.

Parents discussed the ways in which social skills differed in autistic children compared to their non-autistic peers, and the way in which this impacted upon

friendships. Parents discussed how the social gap between autistic children and their peers widened with age, resulting in friendships breaking down: “[name] was a proper little friend in reception class but not now, the gap between H and the other kids is growing wider each year” (H’s Grandmother), and how this gap in social skills was something parents were worried about: “I worry that this may change as she grows older and her peers get more socially sophisticated” (Kursi’s Mum). It could be suggested that differences in social skills may be less important when children are younger, as the ways in which children play and socialise are less complex (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). However, as autistic children move through school, social networks and the composition and nature of friendships change, with older children’s friendships often being more focused on emotional connections. This may result in autistic children finding friendships more challenging the older they become which has implications for support and transition.

### **5.5.3 Differing Nature of Friendships**

Many adults spoke about how autistic children may have a different understanding of what friendships are, compared to their neurotypical peers, and that this may influence the types of relationships they are able to make. Many children showed a preference for playing with one friend at a time, as they had difficulties with group dynamics: “She prefers playing with one friend at a time and struggles more in a group of friends” (Kursi’s Mum). This propensity for having a singular friend may be linked to the non-neurotypical social skills that often characterise autistic children. Navigating groups of friends requires the ability to understand the needs and feelings of multiple individuals at once and therefore showing a preference for being with one friend at a time could reduce these stressors. However, focusing on one friend was reported as sometimes causing conflict amongst autistic children and their peers as their actions could be interpreted as possessive: “She can be possessive and needs someone to be her friend and her friend only. If her friend is also friends with someone else, this can be hard for her” (YaYa’s Mum).



For some autistic children, being friends with the opposite gender was something which was noted to be a preference, and this was believed to be because their expectations of what they wanted from friendships were different to societal norms. Loodoluf's teacher expressed that they believed his choice to play with girls was because of their choice of games: "He does veer very much towards girls and he prefers the more creative play that they embark on (coming up with dance routines for example)". Others believed that their child would still have a preference for friendships with the opposite gender, but that they felt pressure to have same gender friends at school:

She often seemed to get on better with boys when she was a toddler/pre-schooler [...] I think she still seems more comfortable in boys' company at present but due to social norms/divides that seem to have occurred now (especially in her class) she has been almost pushed into having female friends (Benjy's Mum)

Research shows that neurotypical children tend to favour friendships with those of the same gender (Pellegrini et al., 2007) which may result in teaching staff and parents believing that same gender friendships should be the norm for their children. Being aware that autistic children may have differing expectations of friendships, including preferring to engage in friendship with the opposite gender is important and has been identified in previous studies (Chamberlain et al., 2007). However, research with larger numbers of autistic pupils failed to identify this gender effect, with boys being more likely to connect with other boys, and girls with other girls. This was also the case for the children in the current study, as not all adults discussed mixed-gender friendships, highlighting the complex and differing friendship needs of autistic children.

Family members spoke of how many children believed that everyone was their friend when, in reality, these friendships were perceived as non-reciprocal by adults: "H doesn't talk about friends at school much. I think he would like [name] to come to our house, he has been invited several times but never accepts. I know he just tolerates H really" (H's Grandmother); "Loodoluf thinks that everybody is his friend when clearly

they are not and are sometimes happier when he is busy doing something else. This may be due to how bossy he becomes” (Loodoluf’s Mum). This perception of non-reciprocal friendships is in line with previous literature which found that parents of autistic individuals often reported that peer relationships lacked reciprocity (Orsmond et al., 2004). It has been suggested, however, that this lack of reported reciprocity may be a result of adults having differing definitions of what friendships are compared to autistic children, who may consider friends to be peers with whom they spend time with (Kuo et al., 2013). This will be discussed further in Chapter 6 which explores the results of the children’s data. Therefore, adult reports of reciprocal friendships may not reflect how autistic children feel about the friendships highlighting the importance of including autistic children’s voices in research concerning them.

Parents discussed feeling concerned about the vulnerability of their children and how this might impact their relationships. Lennie’s Mum, for example, was aware that although her son did have some successful friendships, there was a power imbalance in his friendship group:

Both his friends are very nice boys but you can always sense the imbalance. The friends are far more likely to ask things from him than the other way round. He is a bit vulnerable. We lost books and toys to people (not to his best friends) because he cannot say no

This concern over vulnerability has been highlighted in previous research. Autistic individuals are thought to be more susceptible to peer victimisation due to not having the protective factors associated with a supportive peer group (Cappadocia et al., 2012) and Sedgewick et al. (2018) found that parents expressed concern over the vulnerability of their daughters as they matured into adults. Given the recent findings that autistic adults have reported having difficulties with saying no and that they struggle to identify hurtful behaviours being carried out by close relatives and friends (Pearson et al., 2022), the concerns parents here have surrounding vulnerability warrant further attention.

#### 5.5.4 Onwards and Upwards: Wants and Fears Surrounding Future Friendship Status

Adults spoke about their hopes and fears for children's future friendships. Some talked about how they believe friendships may develop as children move through the education system and their desire for these to be successful. Eli's Mum shared her thoughts about Eli moving from a mainstream to a special setting: "I am wondering how Eli will get on at his secondary school as he is moving from mainstream to a special school [...] I would love Eli to have more friends".

For others, the challenges children may face when transitioning to secondary school was something they believed to be of importance: "He will need to work on building new meaningful relationships as he transfers to secondary school and understand that friendships will change, differ and deepen as he gets older and matures" (RNHC's Teacher). Transitions have been found to be a challenging time for autistic children. It often involves moving to a new school environment which brings with it changes in social networks and interactions with peers, and additional academic pressures (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Peters & Brooks, 2016). Being aware of the challenges that moving to a new school brings has implications for transition support from both a school perspective and a parental one. For example, providing support which helps autistic children to navigate changing friendship groups prior to and during transition may alleviate the stressors some children face in the move to a new school.

Parents also expressed concern for their child's happiness as they grew older: "I am fearful for her future, her social life and potential happiness being affected by her current inability to understand her peers" (Newton's Mum), and retrospectively spoke of prior concerns for the future: "I was very worried when she was younger as she wasn't naturally sociable compared to other kids her age" (Benjy's Mum). This concern for happiness was not something that teachers spoke about, suggesting that longer term concerns are something that parents are more attuned to, and something that they may be planning to support going forward.

Adults within the study discussed the challenges they perceived autistic children face in relation to friendship development and maintenance. Turn-taking and conflict

resolution were seen as areas in which children needed additional support across not only school settings, but within the home as well. For some parents, interventions aimed at reducing these challenges were causing more harm than good for their children in mainstream school, with peer support interventions sometimes resulting in heightened peer difficulties and a clear difference between their autistic children and non-autistic peers. Furthermore, a call for more tailored social skills support was evident throughout, especially for children who were close to secondary school age, taking care to consider the differing nature of friendships amongst autistic children. Finally, longer-term support for parents may be beneficial in reducing anxieties surrounding friendships and social skills.

The findings within this chapter shed light on adults' perceptions of autistic children's friendships across school settings. It is evident that the experiences of autistic children are perceived differently between not only school settings, but also between key adults in their lives, highlighting the importance of listening to children and multiple informants not only when researching friendship experiences, but also when developing support. Children were perceived to have varying needs across and within school settings, and a call for more tailored support was clear throughout. Although there are challenges that children face when interacting with their peers, autistic children appear to be able to make and maintain successful friendships. However, these friendships may differ from those of their non-autistic peers, and for some children, the want for friendships is not strong and this is something which must be accepted by key adults in their lives. Autistic children's experiences of their own friendships will be the primary focus of the next chapter in which I will present the findings from parent-led interviews with their children.

## **Chapter 6: Study Two Results – Child data**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss findings from a reflexive thematic analysis of autistic child interview data. This analysis was designed to address the following research questions:

- How do autistic children experience their friendships?
- Do these experiences differ between school types?

Unfortunately, not enough data was obtained to make a meaningful comparison between mainstream and special schools, therefore this chapter will make tentative observations regarding school settings and will focus more strongly on age and gender differences between the children<sup>2</sup> in mainstream schools. The limitations surrounding this will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Five themes were constructed from the data:

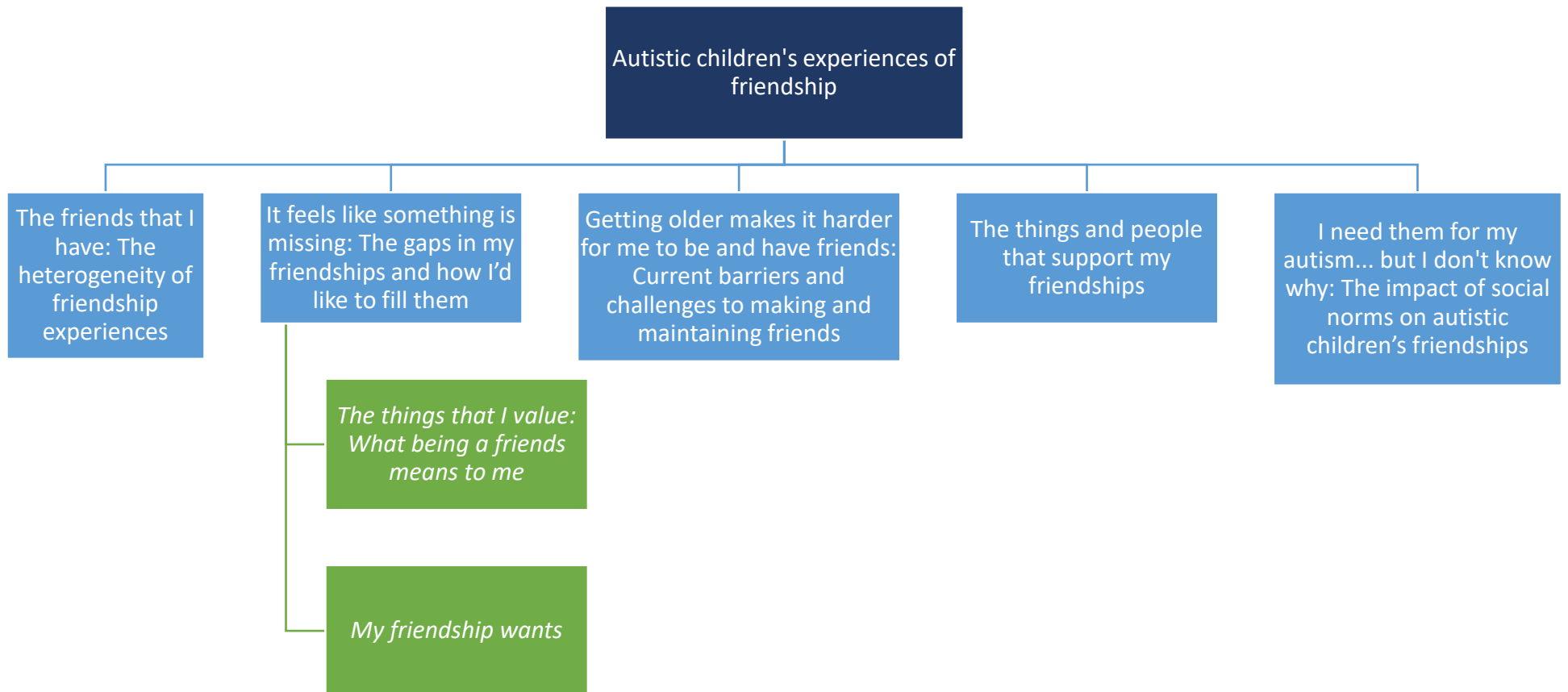
1. The friends that I have: The heterogeneity of friendship experiences
2. It feels like something is missing: The gaps in my friendships and how I'd like to fill them
  - a. The things that I value: What being a friend means to me
  - b. My friendship wants
3. Getting older makes it harder for me to be and have friends: Current barriers and challenges to making and maintaining friendships
4. The things and people that support my friendships
5. I need them for my autism... but I don't know why: The impact of social norms on autistic children's friendships

The five themes are presented in Figure 9.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Within this chapter, autistic children are often referred to as 'children' in order to aid readability. Where the discussion is surrounding neurotypical friends or classmates, this has been made clear.

**Figure 9:** *Thematic map of children's friendship experiences in Study Two*



## 6.2 The Friends That I Have; The Heterogeneity of Friendship Experiences

The experiences children had with their real-life friends were spoken about by many across the study. These experiences differed between children and between age ranges, with some children having an abundance of successful friendships and others reporting that they had none. Children placed differing levels of importance on their friendships, with many acknowledging that having friends was important to being happy.

Many children in the study expressed that they had successful friendships, with some having a good group of friends at school:

C: Yeah (pause) we play with some of my other friends

P: Good girl, who are your other friends?

C: (names three friends) lots of people

P: You have haven't you yeah (J, F, 9, MS)

It could be suggested that for some children, maintaining friendships at school may be easier than at home, and it is not uncommon for autistic children to separate home and school time with regard to their friendships (Fox et al., 2023). However, many children spoke about not only having successful friendships, but having friendships that had lasted over time and across settings. Some had maintained friendships since reception (age 4-5 years):

P: Where did you meet [name]? How did you meet her? Can you remember?

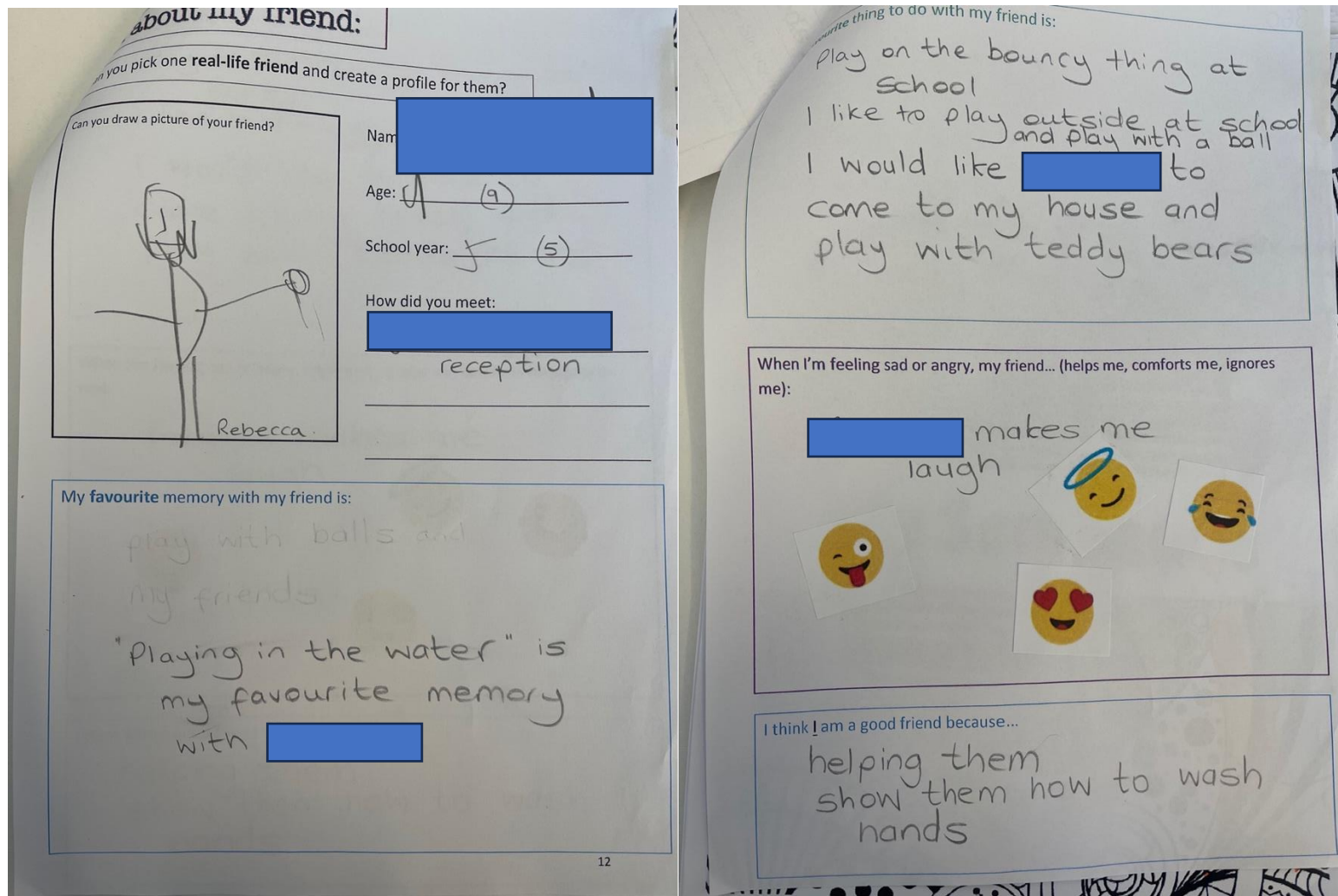
C: Er [place] reception

P: You met her in reception [...] So you've known [name] a long time haven't you

C: Yes" (J, F, 9, MS)



Figure 10: Scrapbook extract from J (F, 9, MS) of their real-life friend, showing her favourite activities and favourite memory



This again highlights the heterogeneous nature of autistic children's current friendships and the need for individualised support as not all children require support with friendship maintenance, as it is evident in Figure 10 that some children have long-lasting friendships.

For others with successful friendships, they specified having a best friend:

P: So this bit was all about a real-life friend, not an imaginary one, can you tell me who they are?

C: [name] [...] she's my best friend at school" (Benjy, F, 8, MS).

The want for, and identification of, a best friend was prevalent across genders, ages, and school settings, but was more commonly reported by girls, in line with social norms for girls to have close-knit friendships (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Understanding this want for a best friend may be important for supporting children's future relationships. Best friends have been shown to be of importance during middle childhood, helping to support children through challenging transitions and providing social support (Bowker et al., 2006). However, the need to have the same best friend, i.e. having the same individual as a best friend over a period of time, has been shown to be less important than the feeling of having stable best friendships (albeit with different peers), i.e. believing you have a stable best friend, even if that best friend changes from day to day (Bowker et al., 2006). This may suggest that feeling as if a best friend is present, even if they are not reciprocal best friends, may be a protective factor for some children in the study. It is clear from parent reports in this study that some children said they had a best friend, but that adults deemed this relationship not to be mutual. It could be that this is less important for autistic children and that feeling as if a best friend is present in their life is something they value and should be accepted, even if it does not match the reality perceived by others. Therefore, if an autistic child sees an interaction as a friendship, then it is meeting their need for friendship, even if it is just acquaintanceship to neurotypical eyes, or is non-reciprocal.

However, not all children were able to name or speak about having a best friend, and even for those that could, some friendships were fleeting in nature and often dependent on the situation. For some children, playmates at the park were seen as friendships, despite losing contact with those peers when returning home:

C: That's fun and we get to play with them but most of the new friends I meet I like meet them though and I never really see them again

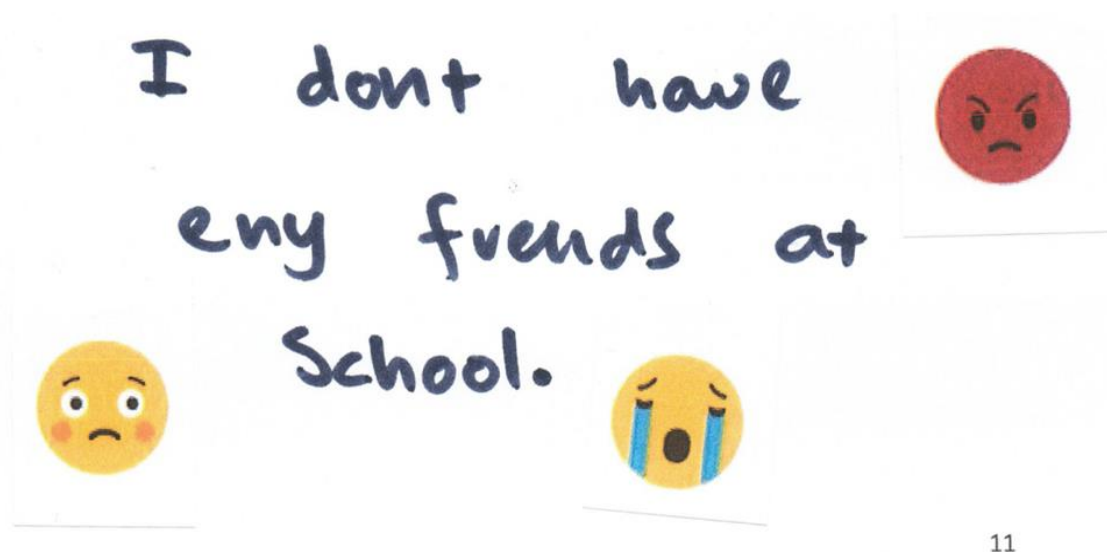
P: Oh really, why?

C: Yeah, there's one called [name] who I once saw at this park and then after that I never saw her again because we never met up again (Benjy, F, 8, MS)

Studies have found that many autistic young people often base their friendships on proximity (Howard et al., 2006). As with the children discussed above, who tended to only have friendships at school, friendships outside of school may also be linked to specific environments. Therefore providing children with the opportunity to engage with peers outside of school may be important for allowing them to form friendships, albeit fleeting, with peers. This is especially important during times when school is not available, such as during the holidays.

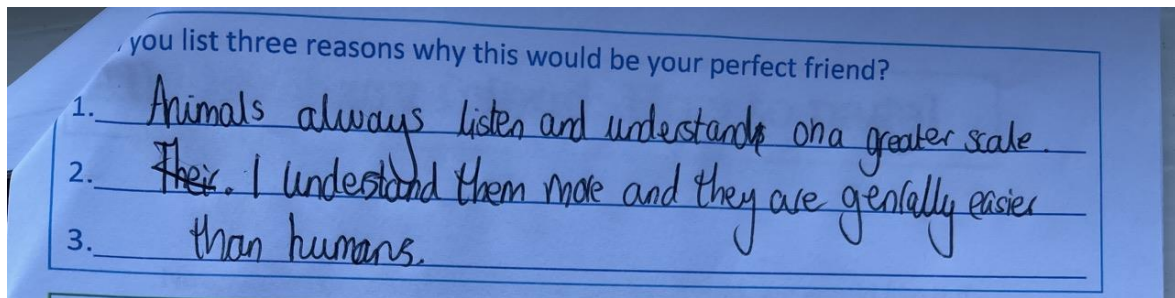
However, for some children, friendships were not present at all, resulting in feelings of loneliness: "I got, I have no one at school, so I have no one to play with so I just feel lonely and left out" (YaYa, F, 10, MS), further highlighted by the emojis and written text by YaYa in Figure 11. Some children reflected on times when they had experiences like this in the past: "P: You'd be lonely C: I have had a time with no friends P: Yeah? How did you feel about it? C: Sad (mimics crying)" (Lennie, M, 8, MS). Research has shown that lack of friends in autistic individuals has clear links to feelings of exclusion and loneliness (Keates, 2022), which has long-term implications for children's wellbeing and development.

**Figure 11:** Scrapbook extract from YaYa (F, 10, MS) showing her lack of friends



For children who did not report having friends, some had overcome this challenge by finding friendships in the form of animals: “Because I think [name], as you can probably hear in the background, and [name] are my most set solid friends” (Newton, F, 11, MS). This can be found not only in Newton’s interview, but was also something repeated throughout her scrapbook with Newton choosing to cover up the outline of a human during the ‘perfect friend’ task and replacing this with a horse and a dog.

**Figure 12:** Scrapbook extracts from Newton (F, 11, MS) highlighting that not all children believe humans to be their ideal friend



Friendships with animals have been shown to provide many benefits. Children growing up with pets in the home have been found to benefit from a range of social and developmental advantages, including decreased stress (Gadomski et al., 2015) and an increase in prosocial behaviours (Grandgeorge et al., 2012). Furthermore, not only do interactions with animals provide social support, but it is likely that being with an animal will promote socialisation with people, increasing children's avenues for social support and providing a basis for exploring shared interests (McConnell et al., 2016; O'Haire,

2017). Studies have shown that for some autistic individuals, pets can serve as a compensatory mechanism for social contact (Atherton et al., 2023) and that autistic children were more than twice as likely to interact with a dog in a naturalistic setting than with a human (Prothmann et al., 2009). This may suggest two things. Firstly, that autistic children may show a preference for interactions with animals, and that they use these interactions to compensate for the lack of social connectedness they have with their peers and that is something they value. Enjoying the companionship of animals may be, to some autistic children, their ideal friendship, and therefore this is an area that may benefit from the support of an adult at home or in school. Secondly, that the implementation of animal assisted therapy or the use of companion animals may be something that is beneficial to children and a method of intervention that could be implemented to support children's social and emotional well-being in the absence of human friends, a form of support that has been found to be successful autistic population (Carlisle et al., 2023).

Although many children spoke about having successful friendships, even if these friendships were different to neurotypical definitions, not all children showed an interest in their peers. A number of boys, but not girls, in the study were ambivalent towards friendships and did not want to actively seek new friends. For example: "P: So if those three people weren't in, would you try and make new friends or would you play on your own? C: I'd play on my own" (Loodoluf, M, 8, MS); "I don't want to be friends with anyone else" (Lennie, M, 8, MS). For others, when presented with the option of playing with others, it was not a clear choice: "P: So would you rather do it with your friends? C: Er sometimes, maybe" (RNHC, M, 10, MS). Having a desire for alone time has been identified in previous literature (Calder et al., 2013; Milner et al., 2019) with some autistic children showing a preference for playing on their own (Fox et al., 2023). It is important to understand that for some autistic children, being without friends or playing alone at break time may be a preference, and therefore encouraging friendships that are not wanted or needed may be detrimental to children. It must also be noted that the children in this study who reported ambivalence and wanting alone time also reported that they

did have successful friendships in some form, and therefore it must not be assumed that those without playmates are without friends.

A small number of children also reported that they were unsure about their current friendship status. Although children could name people in their class that they spent time with, some were unsure if this was a friendship: “[I] can barely even tell if we are friends or just two people that go to the same school” (Newton, F, 11, MS). This was echoed by others who had ‘no clue’ who they would name as a friend out of their class or school clubs. Being unsure or confused about friendship status was a common theme found in Chapter 3, and it could be suggested that some children are unable to identify friendships as a result of their differing expectations of what a friend is, and the mutual misunderstanding of social cues between autistic children and their non-autistic peers. Including support for all children, not just autistic children, may help to reduce this. For example, educating non-autistic children on the challenges some autistic children may face during playtime or in different social situations and how to support them may help to reduce this misunderstanding.

Despite the differing levels of friendships across the group, a large proportion of children noted that having friendships was important, and ascribed a large amount of value to having successful friendships. When asked if having friendships was important, children discussed that it was important not only for themselves, but for other people, as friendships offered sources of support with some being aware of the benefits to wellbeing: “it’s good for mental well-being or mental health and just, yeah I think people should have friends” (Newton, F, 11, MS). This is in line with previous work that shows friendships to be protective against depressive symptoms in autistic pre-adolescents (O’Connor et al., 2022). Others were attuned to friendships helping with loneliness: “Yeah, it matters because it’s like someone who’s, who like cares about you a lot and you’re like, not alone” (RNHC, M, 10, MS), findings consistent with previous literature (Bauminger et al., 2004) and an area of concern mentioned by some children in this study. This suggests that although many children in the study encountered challenges with their friendships, they still ascribed value to having and being a friend, and were

often conscious of the positive benefits that may come with friendships, even if they did not have successful friendships themselves. Therefore, providing support for friendship development and maintenance to children who do wish to make friends, may be beneficial to some, even if those friendships look different to neurotypical friendships.

The accounts here highlight the heterogeneous experiences of the children in this study. Many children had successful friendships, and for some, these friendships took a different form than those expected by neurotypical norms. For some, just playing with others was deemed to be a successful friendship, however, for others this was not enough, and many children expressed a want for their current friendships to last longer. Understanding that autistic children have differing wants and experiences is important for key adults and once again highlights the need for speaking with, and creating support in conjunction with, autistic young people.

### **6.3 It Feels Like Something Is Missing - The Gaps in My Friendships and How I'd Like to Fill Them**

Children spoke about the things they felt were missing from their current friendships, and the things that they valued the most in a friendship, through discussions surrounding their perfect friend.

#### **6.3.1 The Things That I Value: What Being a Friend Means to Me**

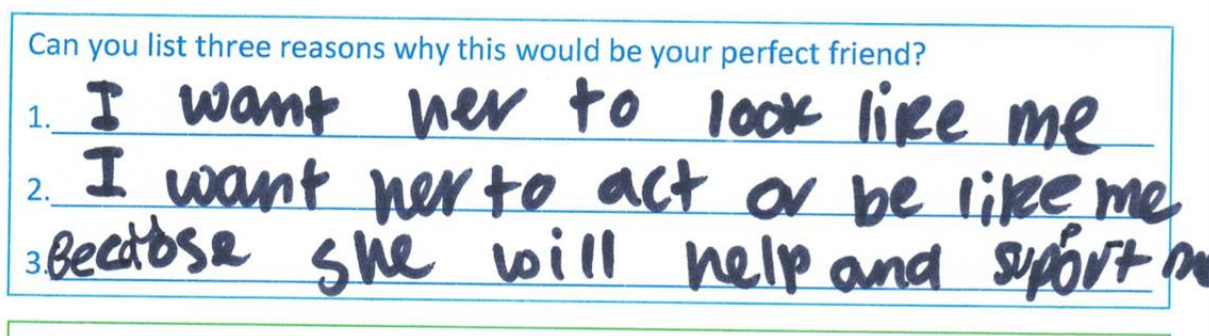
The things that children valued in their friendships differed across the group, with some children putting a large emphasis on the need for kindness and compassion, and others stating that having fun was a bigger priority for them. Children across genders and ages spoke of how being kind was a key trait they valued in their friendships, both in real life and when discussing their perfect friend. For some, their real-life friends showed kindness and compassion during challenging times at school:

Er this is [name] he asks me if I'm ok, he says 'have you told anyone?' and I and if I say no he says 'oh yeah erm how about we tell a grown up' erm and then erm he's just really nice to me when I'm sad (Loodoluf, M, 8, MS)



Others reflected on how their ideal friend would be kind and understanding of their feelings: “Someone who erm is always erm thinks about my feelings because they, they won’t hurt my feelings and sometimes be mean to me, they’ll always be fun and nice” (YaYa, F, 10, MS) and a want for help and support was evident in YaYa’s scrapbook in Figure 13.

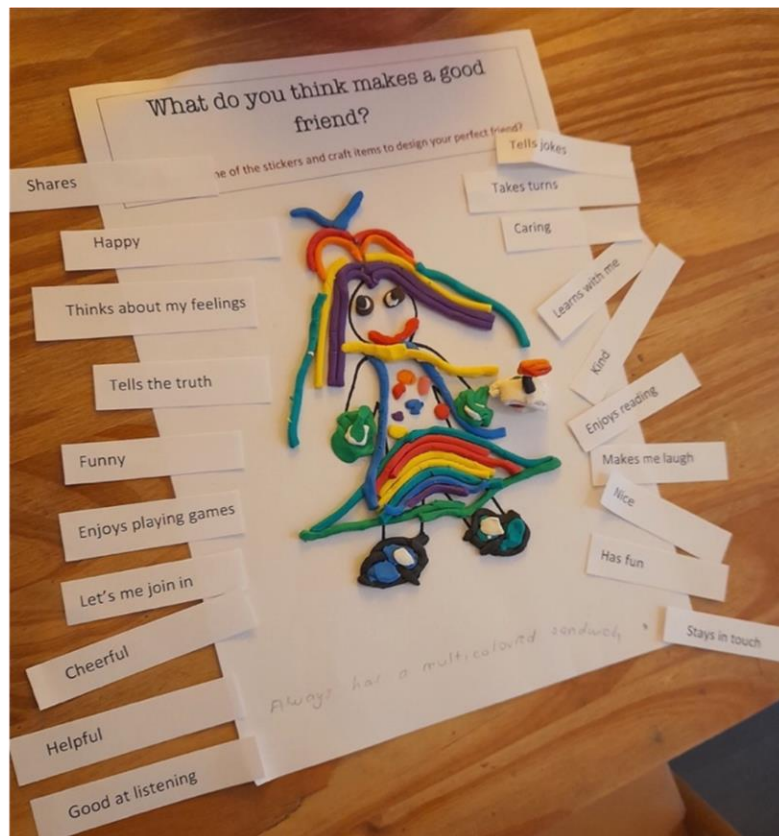
**Figure 13:** Scrapbook extract from YaYa (F, 10, MS) showing her friendship wants



Having kind and understanding friends has been found to be an important marker for friendship in autistic individuals. Engaging with friends who are neurotypical may provide children with a peer who is able to explain social situations and act as mediators for conflict (Crompton et al., 2020c; Sedgewick et al., 2019), and areas of social interaction that autistic children likely find challenging. Therefore, having a friend who is kind may act as a support network to help navigate these challenges and may be highly beneficial for some children. However, it could be suggested that a difference might be evident between special and mainstream schools with regard to understanding of needs. Neurotypical children, although able to be kind and compassionate towards others, are likely unable to fully understand the challenges faced by autistic children, and those

attending special schools may find themselves surrounded by children more like themselves who are attuned to the difficulties they may face.

**Figure 14:** Scrapbook extract Kursi (F, 7, MS) showing the use of playdough to engage with the study and the labels she attributed to a good friend



**Figure 15:** Scrapbook extract from *W (M, 9, SS)* showing the values he believed were important in a friend



Alongside being kind, many children discussed the need for friends to make things fun, and that there was a big emphasis on the need for friends to make you happy: “I like people who tell jokes and are funny because they erm, it’s just they’re very erm, it’s just like, my type of friend because it’s not someone who’s always serious, someone who’s a bit more like silly” (YaYa, F, 10, MS) and having fun appeared to be a key motivation for spending time with friends:

P: So why do you enjoy playing and hanging out with your friends?

C: I don’t know, actually I do know, no I don’t, actually, because they’re fun”

(Kursi, F, 7, MS).

Children also spoke about the number of friends they believed would be beneficial for them. For some children, a smaller number of friends was valued:

P: And is it nicer to have just one friend? Just you and one friend than being in a group of friends?

C: Erm it would be nice with one friend, it is nice with one friend” (Bella, F, 8, MS).

However, others believed that having a larger group of friends would be more fun: “C: Because the more people there is the more fun it is [...] It’s just like, that’s how it works” (Benjy, F, 8, MS). Previous studies have also highlighted these differences in friendship numbers. Literature has suggested that autistic children show a preference for fewer friends (Ryan et al., 2021), and that maintaining relationships with multiple people was a stressor for some (Sedgewick et al., 2019), whilst others found that autistic individuals wanted to engage with a larger group (Muller et al., 2008). It is therefore likely that autistic children will all show different preferences for not only the type of friends they have and want, but for the number of friends too. Speaking with children regarding what they value in a friendship is therefore important if tailored support is going to be provided.

### **6.3.2 My Friendship Wants**

The areas that children believed were missing from their friendships, or areas that they believed needed improvement, varied from the want for more people to play with, to a need for more emotional support. Children spoke of how having friends that would happily play with them was something that they would enjoy, but also something which is lacking: “Because I don’t wanna play on my own all the time, I do it sometimes but I want to play with other people” (Loodoluf, M, 8, MS). It was clear that children wanted friends that let them join in and were inclusive, a possible reflection of some children’s challenges with being excluded from current friendship groups. This was also echoed by some children who expressed they would like to have friends who were more compliant and would play the games that they wanted to. Alongside this, there was a focus on friends being there to make individuals happy, which can be seen in both Benjy’s interview and scrapbook extracts:

C: So that I can enjoy myself with them [...]

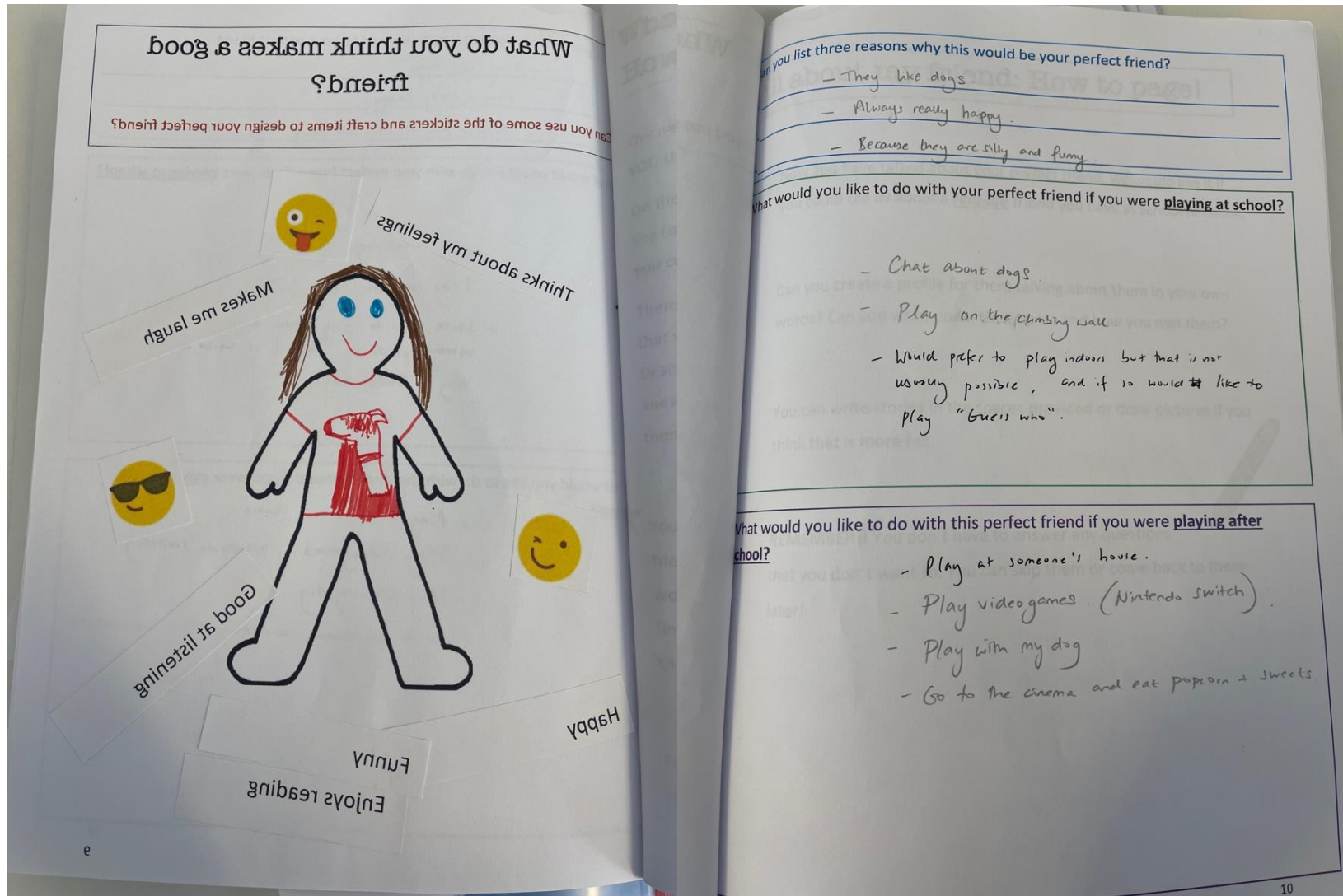
P: That's nice, yeah and what else did you write there?

C: Play video games

P: And why do you think that would be a fun thing to do after school?

C: Because I like playing video games. (Benjy, F, 8, MS).

Figure 16: Scrapbook extract from Benjy (F, 8, MS) showing her perfect friend and the activities she would like to do with them



Previous research has shown that autistic individuals can find switching between interests exhausting and distressing (Sedgewick et al., 2016). Learning new games or social rules could be challenging or frustrating for some, and therefore this want to have friends who are more compliant, and happy to play games that children suggest, could be a way of reducing this stress for autistic children.

The types of games that children wanted to play were also closer to the preferences of younger children, such as role-play or structured gameplay, and this was something that children spoke of being missing from their current friendships when discussing their perfect friend:

P: And if your, if your friend came home with you, what would you do after school?

C: Play lego and teddy bears” (J, F, 9, MS),

Many expressed the want for more friends as this would increase gameplay:

P: Hmm, and do you like meeting new friends?

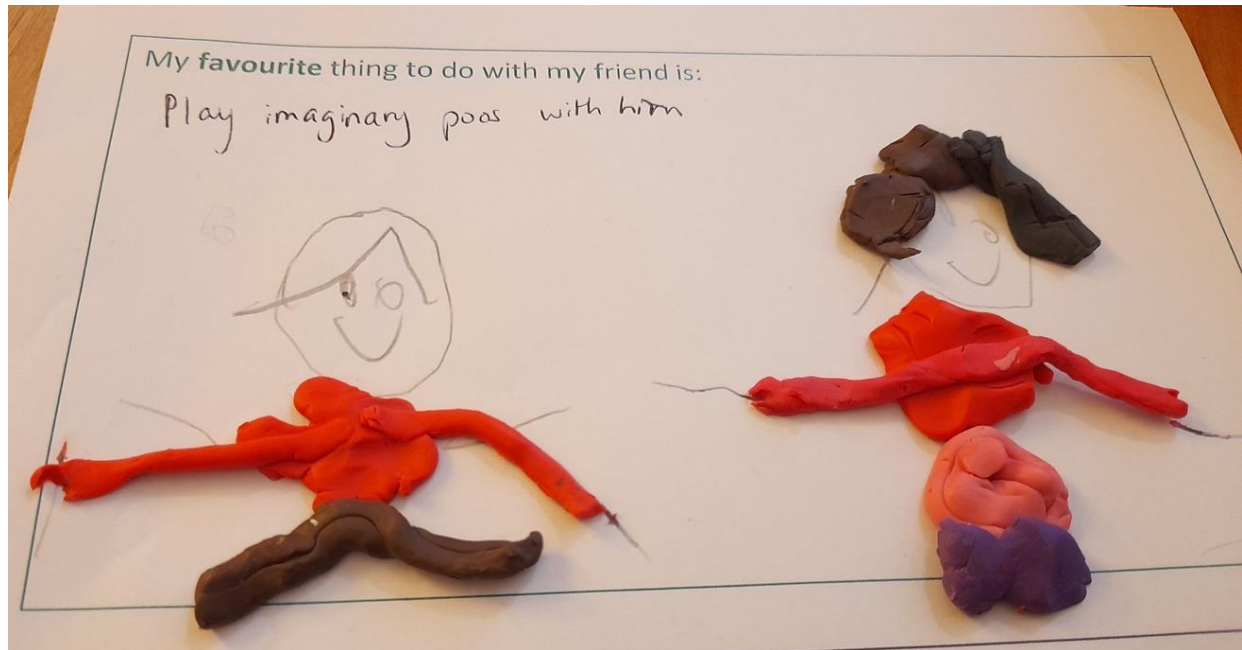
C: Yes

P: Why do you like meeting new friends?

C: Because they’re so friendly to me, we play games and stuff (H, M, 8, MS).

In Figure 17, Kursi speaks about how gameplay is her favourite thing to do with her friends and shows evidence of engaging in imaginary play with her real-life friend.

**Figure 17:** Scrapbook extract *Kursi (F, 7, MS)* describing her favourite gameplay activity



As previously discussed, some autistic children prefer to engage in games that are deemed for younger children, an area which often causes challenges for children as they move through primary school. Children in this study showed a clear preference and want for these types of activities, and therefore may benefit from having the opportunity to engage with children who show similar interests, or children who may be younger than themselves in order to fulfil this want.

Finally, some children expressed the want for more emotional support from their friends. Benjy spoke of how she believed that having a friend who thought about her feelings would support her in times of emotional need:

C: Thinks about my feelings



P: Think about your feelings? Yeah. And why do you think that makes a good friend, someone who thinks about your feelings?

C: Because they can help me when I get emotional” (Benjy, F, 8, MS)

Others expressed that they would like to have more friends who listened and supported them: “I don’t know why, it’s just another person I can rely on [...] she would listen to me” (Aahh, F, 9, MS). Although many studies have shown that autistic children show a preference for companionship, these quotes highlight that some children do have a want for emotional connectedness with their peers. Children across the study all valued different aspects of friendships, highlighting the challenge with one-size-fits-all interventions and supports. Listening to children about what they value and need should be a priority in the design and implementation of future interventions.

Within this theme, the main wants and needs of participating children for their friendships were explored. Key traits including kindness, understanding, and compassion were identified by many children, and some believed that having a friend needed to include an element of fun and gameplay. Autistic children had varied opinions on the number of friends that they would like, with some valuing one or a small friendship group and others expressing a want for larger groups. A want for more inclusivity from other children was clear throughout and many wanted friends to be less bossy and more compliant, especially in relation to gameplay and activity choices. This want for compliance may be challenging and unfair for peers and may be a key area that autistic children need support with to maintain friendships. Finally, despite many autistic individuals expressing the want for companionship and playmates, some did value emotional support from friends and felt this was lacking in their current friendships.

#### **6.4 Getting Older Makes it Harder For Me to Be and Have Friends: Current Barriers and Challenges to Making and Maintaining Friendships**

The challenges and barriers children identified in relation to making and keeping friendships were spoken about across genders and ages. Children spoke of the difficulties

they were experiencing with their current friends and how these challenges had changed, and often worsened, over time.

For many, friendship difficulties were increasing as they became older. Children spoke of how their peers were maturing with regard to their play preferences, and that this social gap was becoming more evident as they moved into the later years of primary school. Many children reported that they would prefer to engage in role-play or structured games during break time, but their peers were more interested in talking to each other and doing more ‘grown-up’ activities. For some, it was clear that they were focused on having a playmate as opposed to having the emotional tie that neurotypical children tend to focus on as they move through primary school. For example, Bella stated that “you’d want someone to play with or be with and if you had friends then you would have someone” (Bella, F, 9, MS) and others expressed that being a perfect friend included play:

P: OK. Can you tell me what you’re doing with this friend at school?

C: Playing together

P: Why did you pick that?

C: Because it’s fun, and if we play together he’ll be a perfect friend to have (Lennie, M, 8, MS).


This want for play over other forms of friendship is in line with literature which has shown that autistic children tend to favour role-play, structured play, and active play (Fahy et al., 2021). It is thought that this may be linked to autistic children’s need to have varied sensory elements in their play, such as running and jumping freely, as opposed to following active play with set rules such as football, features of play that are more commonly found among younger children. Autistic children have also been shown to favour companionship over intimacy, which may also explain some children’s preference for playmates rather than soulmates (Bauminger et al., 2004; Calder et al., 2013), a want that is discussed in the previous theme in this chapter. Understanding that some children

may want different things from their friendships compared to their neurotypical peers is important for both parents and those supporting autistic children.

**Figure 18:** *Scrapbook extract Bella showing her favourite things to do include gameplay, specifically with friends (F, 9, MS)*

**All about me:**

Can you draw a picture of yourself or something you like?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Nickname: Bella

Age: 9

School year: Year 4

Hair colour: Brown

Update your status: What have you been doing today?

Played on iPad, watched detective Pikachu movie, did gardening and had a barbeque.

My Favourite things to do:

- Watch movies with mummy.
- Playing games
- Drawing
- iPad
- Friends, playing with them
- Park
- Baking

As children moved through primary school, this change in play preference had resulted in a loss of friends for some children, and many highlighted that a major barrier to engaging with their peers was the shift towards conversation-based activities. For some, barriers began with initiating friendships:

It's hard to make friends because in year two there was this new person who came and I wanted to make friends with her but I was too scared, I didn't know what to

say to her and, I was trying to say something, but everyone was laughing at me because I was too scared to talk to her and I got scared because she was looking at me and I didn't know what to say to her so, and everyone was laughing at me so I got scared (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

This challenge with initiating friendships has been identified in past research, with autistic boys reporting that establishing friendships was the biggest challenge of all, often waiting for others to make the first move (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010). This was echoed by other children who expressed they struggled with talking to new people: "I find it scary until I get to know them" (Benjy, F, 8, MS). Understanding the challenges children may face with making new friends can allow support to be tailored, especially as children move through primary school and begin to think about the transition to secondary education. Including support which encourages non-autistic peers to make first contact or including adult supported ice breaker activities for children to engage with may help some autistic children overcome this initial barrier to friendship development.

For others, the challenges of navigating conversations with friends, and the difficulties they had surrounding initiating and holding conversations, especially as peers began to favour talking over playing games, was evident:

I don't know what to say to her but I need her to start the conversation, I need her to ask the questions and then I can do it but it's just I don't know what to say to her and she likes to talk (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

Research has shown that autistic children often find initiating conversations with peers challenging and prefer to steer the conversation towards their special interest, or for others to take the lead (Kelly et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2009). These challenges with conversations were seen across both genders, with one child expressing how conversations were much easier with younger friends: "you can't just be like 'hey can you be my friend?' they would be like 'ehhhh?' that would have been much easier if that was

in like nursery” (RNHC, M, 10, MS). It is clear that children in this study found initiating conversations an area of challenge, and therefore support aimed at providing children with the skills to navigate this may be beneficial in overcoming this barrier and facilitating friendships in autistic children. For example, role-play with family members can provide space for children to practise how they may respond in different social situations (Oppenheim-Leaf et al., 2012), a technique used by RNHC’s mother when preparing him for the move to secondary school. Care must still be taken to ensure that when supporting conversations with peers that children want this support, and that friendships are not being forced by adults.

Some children went on to discuss that when they did engage in conversations with peers, they felt like this was often done in the wrong way and that their want to be truthful often resulted in the loss of friendships:

I started to lose my friends because I would talk to them sometimes but I would say it in the wrong way and then they would get sad and upset because I was being mean to them and then they didn’t want to be my friend anymore because I kept messing up when I talked to them [...] because someone asked ‘Oh how does my picture look?’ and I, I said, I said like ‘it looks a bit bad’ but, I didn’t know, I told the truth, but I didn’t know what to say because she asked [...] I didn’t know how to say it without being mean to her so I just said it and someone next to her said ‘that’s not very nice’ (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

Here, YaYa refers to speaking to her friends in ‘the wrong way’, suggesting that she sees neurotypical forms of communication and friendship as the ‘correct’ way of interacting with others. The explicit teaching of neurotypical social skills and interactions is something which is often targeted by interventions and is often seen as an important way for autistic children to ‘effectively’ engage with peers (see Systematic Review Chapter 3). However, care must be taken when implying that autistic children should be the sole focus of such interventions. Although studies have shown that children benefit from

peer-mediated interventions which aim to teach autistic children how to engage in peer conversation through the use of partner focused questions (Bambara et al., 2021), these interventions are often based on a neurotypical system of interpretation or communication style. Promoting non-autistic ways of behaving can have a negative impact on autistic children's development, especially identity development, and there is concern that teaching autistic individuals to alter their communication to pass as neurotypical may have negative consequences for mental health and wellbeing (Halsall et al., 2021; McCracken, 2021). As suggested by Milton (2012), misunderstanding communication should be the responsibility of all individuals, therefore promoting interventions that aim to reduce autistic behaviours may be damaging, and increased knowledge and understanding of non-autistic peers may be more beneficial to all.

Some children often found themselves spending most break times on their own with little input from school to support them: "It's because normally sometimes when I'm at school erm I normally am alone at break because nobody lets me play with them" (Bella, F, 8, MS). It could be suggested that these changing friendship experiences over time are interconnected with developmental processes, such as the development of social and communication skills (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2007). As non-autistic children develop more complex social skills it may be that their preferences for spending time talking with friends becomes a priority over gameplay, which in turn leaves many autistic children feeling like the social gap between themselves and their peers widens with age.

For those children who had developed friendships, many expressed difficulties with maintaining friendships. Difficulties with peers were often related to others not 'playing fairly', resulting in feelings of exclusion from peer groups:

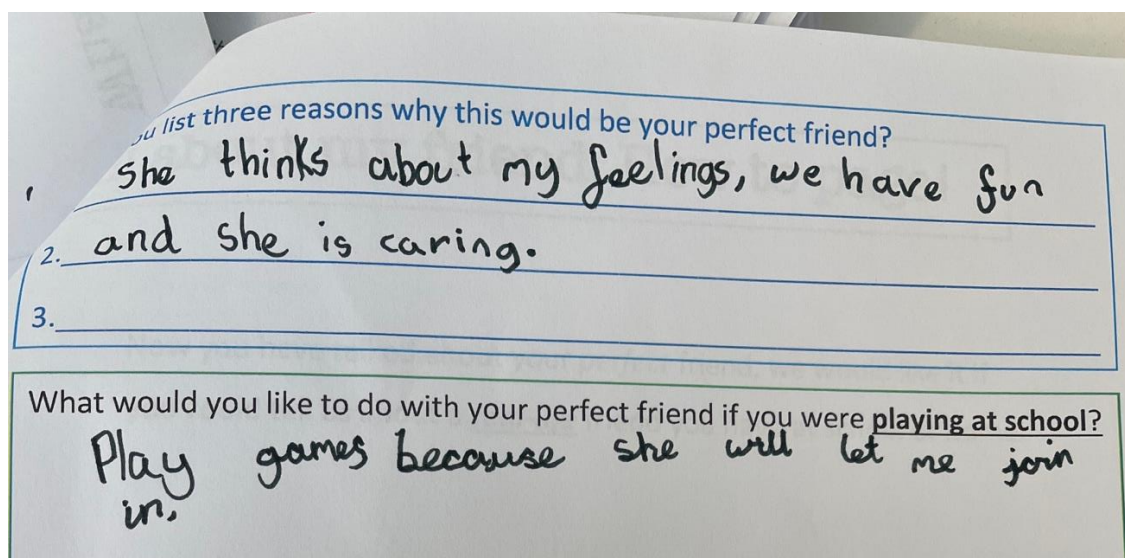
P: Ok, do you think they're playing fairly?

C: No, because it's always who's whoever comes out last or whoever joins the game last has to be the stucker and I'm always the one who joins the game last or

erm is the last one outside because I'm slower so then I have to always be the stucker and it's unfair (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

This shared experience of exclusion was spoken about by many, and it was evident that this exclusion was taken personally by some children: "Because [name] always abandoned me when I asked her to do it with me" (Sandie, F, 11, MS) with many emphasising the need for friends to think about their feelings and to let them join in, as shown in Figure 18. It is common for autistic children to struggle with loneliness and exclusion (Black et al., 2022) and it is evident here that this may become more of a concern as children grow older. Providing support for those who are experiencing these challenges may reduce loneliness and in turn improve well-being in some children and may be something which is particularly important towards the end of Key Stage 2.

**Figure 19:** Scrapbook extract from Bella (F,9,MS) highlighting how she wants friends to let her join in



For others, difficulties were encountered with friends moving away and distance made maintaining friendships challenging:



C: Erm so er he so me and [name] used to be good friends, we are still friends we just used to be together a lot, like five years ago or six years ago but after he moved to [place] I rarely see him and even worse the pandemic is putting us in a worse, worse, worse position (RNHC, M, 10, MS)

This loss of friendships due to physical distance was also spoken about by older children who expressed concern over school transition and the possibility of not moving with their current friends. These children spoke of how transitioning without current friends would mean that they felt the need to make new ones, something which they did not want to do:

P: So in your current school you don't have to meet new friends but when you go to secondary school you will have to meet new friends, and how do you feel about that?

C: I feel, it feels sad to move on but we got to move on [...]

P: And do you like making new friends?

C: I don't have to, but when it comes to secondary school, I have to (RNHC, M, 10, MS)

Here, RNHC discusses the feeling of having to make new friends when he moves to a new school, something which appears to be reinforced by his parent. School transitions have been shown to be especially challenging for autistic children (Hannah & Topping, 2013). Some children may move schools with their friends, to larger secondary schools, others may move at unconventional times due to support needs, or to a special school outside of their neighbourhood. Friendships have been found to be protective during the move to a new school (Ng-Knight et al., 2019), therefore understanding the nuances that may be associated with autistic children's transitions may be key for supporting these friendships during and after transition.

For many children in this study, the challenges with friendships began prior to making friends, with some children having difficulties initiating relationships. For those

with friends, further challenges with maintaining relationships were discussed, and these challenges were different for different age groups. Young children seldom discussed challenges with friends, but those in older year groups reported difficulties with exclusion and often experienced a growing social gap between themselves and their peers. This was exacerbated by some children's concerns over transitioning to new schools without their friends.

### **6.5 The Things and People That Support My Friendships**

Children discussed the different things and people that were helpful in supporting the development and maintenance of their friends. This included a range of different support mechanisms, including the use of technology and support provided by parents and the school environment.

Parental support was mentioned by some girls in the current study, but not all. They reported that parents helped with friendships by being supportive of their differing understandings of what friends may be and by facilitating these friendships by organising play dates: "(nods) and you invite her to my house" (J, F, 9, MS). Parents providing friendship facilitation has been found to be a supportive factor in previous studies (Fox et al., 2023), and many interventions use adult mediation to facilitate friend building activities at home (Chang & Dean, 2022). It is worth noting that many parent-led interventions often focus on providing social skills training, however, children within this study did not speak about support in that way, instead referring to the ways in which their parents encouraged and accepted their friendships, whatever those friendships may look like. This suggests that supporting parents in understanding their autistic children's friendships, and providing guidance on how they may best facilitate these relationships may be one way of helping to maintain children's friendships without teaching/normalising neurotypical social skills onto autistic children.

For some, school was found to play a supportive role with regards to providing a place to meet and make friends with many children speaking about how many of their existing friendships had started at school: "P: Can you remember where you met your real life friends? C: In school" (Loodoluf, M, 8, MS). School was also seen as a familiar setting

which provided a safe place to talk to new peers, with children expressing that they were comfortable meeting new people there. Interestingly, although school as a physical place was spoken about as being supportive, children did not explicitly speak about how adults in school supported them. However, it was clear during the interviews that many children had difficulties at school and wanted more help, which may suggest they did not feel supported sufficiently by their current school:

P: But if you, if you, but if you went to a different school with children similar to you and maybe if you had adults there to support that friendship, to help you, would that

C: Help

P: Would that help you? Would that make you happy about making friends?

C: Yeah

P: And wanting friends again

C: Probably (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

As the interview schedule aimed to focus on the strengths of children and their friendship experiences, lack of support was not probed in the parent-led interviews, however, the literature suggests that many autistic children do feel under-supported by mainstream school (Halsall et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). The literature, however, predominantly focuses on secondary school experiences, therefore this area warrants further exploration. Furthermore, some children, such as YaYa, discuss the want to be at a school where children are similar, such as a special school, in line with the homophily and the double empathy theory (Milton, 2012). Although some suggest that autistic children may have lower social competence than their non-autistic peers, it may be that autistic children have different ways of interacting, which neurotypical peers may not understand. Therefore, being in a school where other children may have similar needs and similar communication/interaction styles may help to foster friendships among autistic children.

Alongside having a shared understanding of needs, having shared interests was a key supportive element for many children. For some children, having a special interest that they could use as an anchor point for conversations was deemed to play a supportive role in their access to friends, and children often included their special interest as their favourite thing to do with friends as seen in Figure 20 and the quote below:

P: Ah brilliant, erm, why do you think liking dogs is important to you?

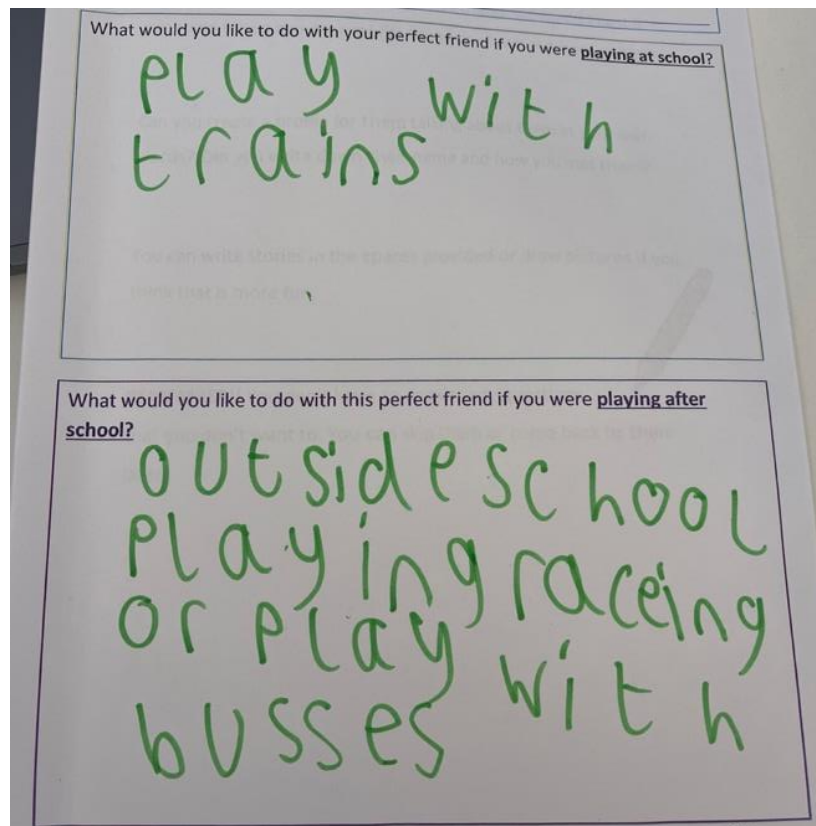
C: So they can come to my house and my play with my dog [...]

P: So what would you like to do when you're playing at school with your perfect friend?

C: Chat about dogs (Benjy, F, 8, MS).

Many studies have shown that having a shared interest or a common activity is a key requirement and marker of autistic individual's friendships (O'Hagan & Hebron, 2016), and some have found links between having a shared interest and a sense of belonging (Sosnowy et al., 2019). Providing children with spaces to engage with shared interests, such as after school clubs or lunch time clubs, could be a key way that schools can support autistic children in making and maintaining friendships and may help children to overcome the challenges with conversation initiation spoken about in theme four.

**Figure 20:** *Scrapbook extract H (M, 9, MS) showing his favourite thing to do is based upon his key interest*



Being able to enjoy their own favourite interests alongside friends was frequently mentioned as a favourite memory by children:

P: Cool, what makes that memory special for you?

C: Because I was like, I was like, I love video games and I love it, and then like that game was like my favourite game and since I was playing it with [name] it was so much fun but because I played with [name's] big sister called [name] it was even more fun (Benjy, F, 8, MS).

Others found the types of play they engaged with to play a role in facilitating friendships. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, many children had a preference for active play or games that involved structure and set rules: "I, so I find it easier to have structured, this is back to humans now (laughs), I find it easier to have structured play" (Newton, F, 11, MS). Understanding that having structured tasks is a supportive factor for children's friendship development has implications for interventions and support at both home and

school. Support plans could be made to include opportunities to engage with peers in a structured way, something which is likely more of a challenge as children become older.

The role of technology was discussed by many within this study. Some children found the use of messaging apps or video calls as a successful way of communicating with their existing friends and family members:

C: Well, I like messaging

P: On WhatsApp?

C: Yeah

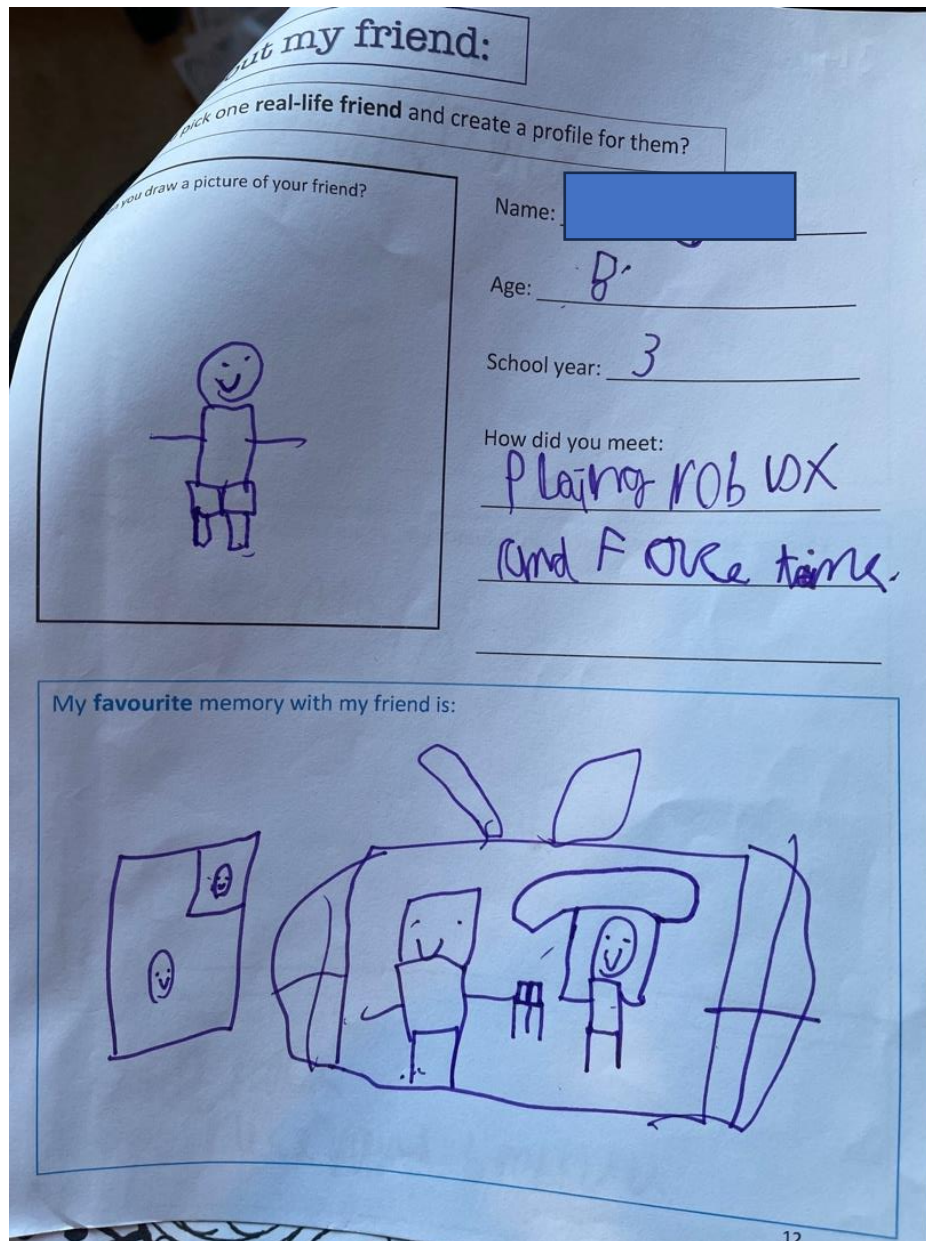
P: You message friends and family don't you on WhatsApp

C: Yeah" (H, M, 8, MS).

For others, online gaming was a way in which they could connect with new people and build new friendships, as well as using gaming as a platform to maintain current friendships:

Erm like I mean like both as in like erm like (...) if it's a game where there's only one player, I have to play it by myself but they can watch but if erm (.) if it's multiple players I like to play with them yeah (Aahh, F, 9, MS).

**Figure 21:** *Scrapbook extract Lennie (M, 8, MS) showing his favourite gaming memory with his real life friend*



Having a preference for internet communication/gaming has been seen in previous studies, and it has been suggested that engaging with gaming/messaging may help to remove the stress of face-to-face interaction whilst also incorporating a shared interest (Muller et al., 2008; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2016; Ryan et al., 2021). It may be that for some children, having online friends is sufficient, despite some adult concerns in the study over the usage of game consoles and screen time. More information on navigating online spaces for parents and school staff may be one way in which this preference for online connections could be supported.

Children throughout the study spoke of the different things and people that supported their friendship development and maintenance. For girls, parents played a role in providing support through the organisation of playdates and by accepting friendships in whatever form they came in. For others, being in a familiar space, such as a school setting, allowed them to feel comfortable engaging with peers and friends, whereas others preferred to do so on an online platform. The differing experiences once again highlight the need for speaking with and listening to autistic children to find out what best supports them in navigating their social worlds.

### **6.6 I Need Them For My Autism... But I Don't Know Why: The Impact of Social Norms on Autistic Children's Friendships**

The ways in which neurotypical social norms impacted on the friendship experiences of children were spoken about frequently across age groups and genders. Children discussed how being aware of their diagnosis often made them feel different from their peers and the impact of masking on their friendships.

Girls, but not boys, spoke about feeling the need to have friends because of their diagnosis, but were unable to explain in more detail why they believed this was important:

P: Hm (pause) do you think it's important that you have friends?

C: Yeah, especially for my autism yeah (nods)

P: Go on then, tell me more

C: I can't really explain more, sorry" (Aaah, F, 9, MS).

Previously, studies have shown that girls may feel more pressure to conform to social norms (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019) and girls have been found to mask more often in an attempt to fit in with their peers and camouflage their difficulties (Cook et al., 2018). This desire to imitate others' social norms may be linked to this feeling of needing to have friends, as the social norm surrounding neurotypical girls' relationships often includes having a group of close friends (Blatchford et al., 2003). Understanding that some



children may feel the need to have friendships to conform with their classmates has important implications for support. Parents and school staff may benefit from speaking to children to explore if they want support aimed at friendship development prior to putting social interventions in place, as imposing unwanted friendships onto children may be detrimental to their well-being. This may be something which is especially key when supporting girls, whose social norms may indicate they want more friends than they actually want to have.

The influence of neurotypical norms was also seen in the way that some children discussed how they were aware of the 'rules' surrounding friendships, such as not being mean or the need to be nice, and how this impacted on their interactions with peers. This was often done by mimicking how neurotypical children engage with friends with some being aware that certain rules must be followed simply "because that's what friends do" (RNHC, M, 10, MS). Furthermore, older children spoke of how these social norms influenced the games they played or their actions in the playground, and that these behaviours were often changed in order to fit in with, and make friends with, their peers: "Erm I think it was my idea, I think I had a lot of energy then so I was trying to fit in 'oh why don't we do this?' and surprisingly everyone wanted to do it" (Newton, F, 11, MS). However, taking part in games that others were playing to avoid being left out was often at a cost to their happiness:

It made me feel sad because I still wanted to play those games, I didn't, I didn't get to play those games anymore, I had to play like, their games but I didn't want to play that because I didn't, I didn't want to play by myself (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

The examples above show the different ways in which children may use masking and conforming to social norms to navigate social spaces and hide some of the challenges they experience in relation to friendships. Masking and camouflaging behaviours are often used as a coping mechanism in social situations (Tubio-Fungueirino et al., 2021), and have been shown to be both protective and harmful for autistic children (Sedgewick et al.,

2021). Previous research has shown that masking can be used to compensate for social communication difficulties via rule learning (Happé, 1995), however, their ability to detect the subtle cues required to make and maintain reciprocal relationships may still be limited (Tager-Flusberg, 2007). Therefore, children's tendency to mask behaviours may lead to internalising problems, as shown by YaYa's expression of sadness. Masking behaviours have also been shown to have links with mental health difficulties (Chapman et al., 2022) and negative impacts on identity development (Berkovits et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of providing spaces for children to be themselves, especially in mainstream environments where the pressure to conform to social norms is likely much greater.

Masking may also have consequences for children who may camouflage their difficulties to the point of not receiving the support they require. For example, YaYa spoke of how engaging in play with peers impacted on the way the school spoke with her:

I don't know if they know that, well erm well we had this PSHE thing at school and I erm, and I said 'I have no friends' erm and then erm the teacher said 'of course you have friends, you play with these people every day' (YaYa, F, 10, MS)

It may be that by masking friendship difficulties and playing with other children, autistic children miss out on much needed support from school, and are therefore unable to develop further friendships that better meet their needs. It also highlights the challenges children have with regard to not being listened to. It is important to speak with and engage autistic individuals when looking at their needs and the support they feel would benefit them (Keates, 2022). The introduction of Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) following the Children and Families Act 2014 aimed to bring together services and include children and young people in the design of their support. However, recent concerns surrounding EHCPs have been raised, suggesting that although children and young people are now 'heard' when developing their support plans, that this is not always

acted upon and developmental level and communication preferences often act as a barrier (Sales & Vincent, 2018). This suggests that children may need to be prioritised further in the development and implementation of their support alongside including the views of their key adults.

In line with previous research, masking behaviours were also more common in older children (Ross et al., 2023). Studies have shown that as children move towards adolescence, individuals begin to mask interests that may be seen as more immature. For example, Halsall et al. (2021) found that girls struggled with their desire to participate in 'younger' games whilst recognising that their neurotypical peers had progressed to more 'grown up' activities. This is reflected throughout the experiences of the children within this study.

Children who spoke of masking behaviours were all attending mainstream schools. Firstly, this may be a result of only one child attending a special school being able to take part in the interview task. However, it is possible, regardless of fewer special school children taking part, that the need to mask is more prominent within mainstream educational settings given that children are surrounded by neurotypical peers, as opposed to those in special school who would likely interact with other autistic individuals or children with learning disabilities. Children with greater language abilities have been shown to mask more often as they have the skills to imitate and mimic others (Happé, 1995). Given that children in mainstream education may have higher language skills, even those with an EHCP, this may also be another explanation for the prevalence of masking within this study. This is not clear from the current data though.

Research highlights that there are benefits to socialising with other autistic individuals, as there is no need to mask social behaviours if an individual's preferred method of communication is accepted (Crompton et al., 2020c). This may be easier for children attending a special school to engage with and suggests that mainstream schools may benefit from providing autistic children with spaces to socialise with other neurodivergent individuals. Mainstream schools may also benefit from promoting an understanding that friendship and social communication is a two-way interaction. For

example, the double empathy theory shows that when autistic people are not understood using their own communication styles, they often feel that they need to comply with neurotypical norms (Milton, 2012). Therefore, providing support for all children within a school setting on how to communicate successfully with others, not just autistic children, may help to support not only friendship development but allow autistic children to be accepted for who they are, which in turn may improve quality of life and wellbeing (Cage et al., 2018).

For girls in this study, the need to conform to social norms by having a close-knit group of friends was deemed to be of importance and older children of all genders conformed to neurotypical norms by engaging in masking behaviours. Care must be taken to not promote neurotypical norms as the 'right way' of socialising for autistic children, and instead accept children's autism and allow them to define what their friendships and support needs if we are to promote good well-being.

The findings in this chapter highlight the differing experiences of autistic children in relation to their friendships. It is clear that there are gender differences in the experiences of children within this study, with girls facing differing social pressures from boys including the expectation to have a close-knit group of friends, even if this is not what they actually want. Children spoke about successes and challenges in their current friendships, and many described having a different definition of what a friend should be compared to their non-autistic peers. Autistic children could identify and discuss the things they believed were missing from their friendships and the things they believed acted as a supportive factor in the development and maintenance of their relationships, further highlighting the importance of including children in the design and implementation of their support. Finally, the findings show that challenges for autistic children become more prominent with age, and that more research is needed to explore the experiences of children during their final few years of Key Stage 2.

The following chapter presents an exploration of parents' perceptions of how COVID-19 impacted on their autistic children's friendships during the move to a new school. Given that many children in this study were preparing for a move to secondary

school, and that autistic children are more likely to have transitions throughout their school career (e.g. moving between inclusion units and mainstream settings) understanding the links between transitions and friends warrants exploration.

# Chapter 7: Study Three - Parents' Perceptions of The Impact of COVID-19 and School Transition on Autistic Children's Friendships

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores parents' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their autistic children's friendships during transition to a new school. A published version of this chapter can be found at:

Fox, L., Asbury, K., Code, A., & Toseeb, U. (2023). Parents' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 and school transition on autistic children's friendships. *Autism*, 27(4), 983-996. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221123734>

## 7.2 Background Literature

Transitioning to a new school can be a major challenge for all children and young people (Bagnall et al., 2020), and particularly for autistic individuals (Canavan, 2014; Hannah & Topping, 2012; Hannah & Topping, 2013). As children move to higher levels of education, such as secondary school, they are often required to navigate more complex environments, adjust to new academic and behavioural expectations, and handle changes in social interaction with peers (Anderson et al., 2000; Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Symonds & Galton, 2014). Changes in peer relationships may be particularly problematic for autistic pupils, given their increased likelihood of experiencing social and communication challenges (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Given the importance of peer relationships for a successful transition (Peters, 2003) it is important to understand autistic peer relationships, and their implications, during the transition to a new school.

Transitions can take place at any time in a child's academic career. However, in the UK they most commonly occur during the move from primary to secondary school, and from secondary to post-16 or post-18 education, or into the workplace. Schlossberg

(2011) suggests that transitions can disrupt relationships, routines and roles, something which may be especially difficult for autistic students and their families. Transition theory helps us to understand why some individuals may react differently to the same type of transition, and how successful transitions are dependent on the resources that individuals are provided with (Patton et al., 2016). This is especially important when supporting autistic students as they may have differing experiences of a transition to their neurotypical peers. Furthermore, research into Schlossberg's theory has found that the children of parents who actively engage with the different phases of transition show higher rates of successful transition (McCoy, 2014). This model therefore highlights the importance of listening to and understanding parental experiences – as their children's primary source of support in many cases - and the need to collaborate with parents during transition planning.

Friendships have been found to play an important protective role as children and young people navigate their social worlds, and in neurotypical children mutual friendships can be a source of social support and a protective factor against bullying (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018). Friendships have also been found to play a key role in supporting individuals during transitions. Having established friendships upon school entry has been found to help children to engage in conversation and play immediately, which in turn helps to establish positive school perceptions (Ladd, 1990). In the move from primary to secondary school, maintaining the same best friend during transition has been found to result in lower levels of conduct problems and higher academic achievement (Ng-Knight et al., 2019), and students maintaining a best friend in the move to University report being less lonely during their first year than peers who did not (Oswald & Clark, 2003). Research has also shown that making new friends may help to provide a more supportive learning environment, resulting in gains in school performance (Ladd, 1990). These findings highlight the importance of supporting individuals to maintain existing and make and maintain new friendships during and after educational transitions at all stages of development.

It is not uncommon for autistic individuals to have fewer friends or lower quality peer relationships than their non-autistic peers (Farley et al., 2009; Howlin et al., 2000; Shattuck et al., 2011). In a study including adolescents with additional needs, Shattuck et al. (2011) found that autistic adolescents were significantly less likely to be invited to social activities than adolescents with other special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs), and almost half reported never seeing their friends outside of school. This finding is supported by Kuo et al. (2013) who identified that autistic adolescents less frequently met their friends outside of school and were more likely to report fewer friendships compared to matched neurotypical peers. These findings suggest that a large proportion of autistic individuals may experience major obstacles to developing supportive and high-quality mutual friendships and being included in social engagements, which may affect their experience of educational transitions.

Autistic individuals may have different ideas of what friendship means compared to their classmates, often defining friendships as being about companionship more than affection and intimacy (Bauminger et al., 2004). Studies have shown that behaviours reflecting companionship, such as participating in common activities, are presented in autistic individuals' descriptions of friendships (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010; Howard et al., 2006), traits which are often associated with younger neurotypical children (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Despite these differing definitions of friendships, Calder et al. (2013) found that autistic children reported being satisfied with their friendships, even if those friendships had been rated by the children as lower quality, suggesting that autistic children can and do have friendships that they deem worthwhile.

Another factor to be considered is that not all autistic children transition into the same types of setting, or at the same time as their peers, impacting on their transition and the composition of their new peer group. For instance, while some transition from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school or college, others may transition to or from a special school or home education. As children generally favour friendships with those who are similar to themselves (homophily) (Bateman & Church, 2008; Hoffmann et al., 2020), the type of establishment a child attends could influence



the number and quality of friendships available to them. Students in mainstream schools may find themselves in an environment predominantly occupied by neurotypical peers, whereas those in alternative provision (e.g., special schools) may have more opportunities for developing friendships with children who have similar needs. A recent systematic review showed that the prevalence of peer difficulties was much higher for autistic children in mainstream schools compared to those in special schools (Maiano et al., 2016). However, some gender differences have been identified with girls reporting more complex issues with peers in specialised settings compared to boys, who were more likely to experience bullying in mainstream settings (Cook et al., 2016, 2018). This suggests that friendships may differ not only between settings, but may also be influenced by gender.

In the period leading up to the transition to secondary school (age 11 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, age 12 in Scotland) autistic pupils have reported being worried about making new friendships and missing their primary school friends (Foulder-Hughes & Prior, 2014; Makin et al., 2017). They have also expressed concerns about ‘fitting in’ with peers at their new school (Foulder-Hughes & Prior, 2014), suggesting that the importance of – and challenges associated with – peer relationships during school transition is something that autistic pupils are aware of. After transition, children have reported that meeting other autistic children allowed them to benefit from shared experiences (Hannah & Topping, 2013), and allowed those who had struggled with peer relationships in primary school to form new friendships (Neal & Frederickson, 2016), supporting the homophily hypothesis. These positive experiences, however, are not echoed by all. Other autistic children have said that their social difficulties persisted into secondary school or college, and that they struggled to make or maintain friendships (Fortuna, 2014; Makin et al., 2017), with some reporting bullying (Fortuna, 2014; Neal & Frederickson, 2016).

Parents play an important role in ensuring that children are prepared and supported in their transition to a new school and can be a vital tool in successful transition planning (Defur et al., 2001; Kohler, 2016; Stoner et al., 2007). Parents may also be aware of, and ready to talk about, the experiences their child shares with them – or

any observed changes in behaviour – before the child themselves. Furthermore, parents of autistic children have been found to provide a unique perspective on their children's transitions, often one that is very different to the experiences discussed by parents of neurotypical children or those with other SENDs (Parsons et al., 2009). Listening to the experiences of parents and the knowledge they have acquired through supporting their children can therefore provide us with insight into how autistic children navigate their friendships during a transition to a new school. Furthermore, parents of autistic children have been found to be more concerned about their children's peer relationships than parents of neurotypical children or those with other SENDs (Lindsay et al., 2016). This may mean that they pay particularly close attention to their child's friendships, providing us with views that may not be obtainable via observations or pupil or teacher reports.

Peer relationships during school transitions are an important challenge to address for autistic pupils in general. It is possible that this challenge may have been intensified by lockdowns linked to COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. A series of lockdowns in the UK began in March 2020 with phased reopening of schools starting in June 2020 for children of key workers and those that were vulnerable, including autistic children (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). Although the option to return to school was provided, research suggests that not all autistic pupils took up this opportunity, resulting in a large variety of educational experiences as provision was regularly interrupted by further lockdowns and self-isolation (Asbury et al., 2021). Therefore, some autistic pupils spent periods of their final year in their old establishment at home, as well as periods of their first year in their new school setting, and have missed a considerable amount of socialisation and schooling opportunities. Furthermore, students have had to undergo the additional transition of moving from school-based to home learning, significantly disrupting routines and the opportunity to develop new ones.

COVID-19 also disrupted the transition activities and support that schools would usually provide. Research has shown that a lack of consistency in the guidance and support provided to children and their parents during transition can create increased stress and anxiety (Doyle et al., 2017). Furthermore, routines in new schools were

affected by the need to limit the risk of spreading the virus. Some examples include staggering the start of the school day, social distancing, mask-wearing and not moving around the school. It is feasible, therefore, that the impact of transition on autistic children's peer relationships during COVID-19 differs from previous years, and this may provide new insights into how best to support autistic pupils through school transition.

Although there is research examining the importance of friendships during transition, there is a lack of research detailing parental views of how their autistic children's friendships have been impacted during a time with social distancing measures in place. The present study aimed to explore how parents perceived the impact of moving to a new school on their autistic children's friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic. To develop a deeper understanding of these experiences two research questions were explored. First, how do parents perceive the impact of moving schools during COVID-19 on their autistic children's friendships? Secondly, to what extent do parents believe that COVID-19 has impacted their children's friendships?

## **7.3 Method**

### **7.3.1 Methodological Approach**

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), an interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis which aims to identify and analyse patterns or themes in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This study used the same analysis as those described in Chapter 4, where a full overview of the methods used within RTA can be found.

### **7.3.2 Ethics**

As with Study 2, this study was approved by the Education Ethics Committee at the University of York (Reference 20/05). Parents provided informed consent before taking part in the interview. The consent form can be found in Appendix M.

### **7.3.3 Participants**

Fourteen participants who were parents or carers of school- or college-aged children with a formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) took part in this study. They had all transitioned to a new educational setting during the Covid-19 pandemic and all had an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) which means their need for additional support, and potentially to choose a special school over a mainstream school, are legally recognised. Participant information can be found in Table 3. All participants are referred to by a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. The sample was recruited from parents who had previously taken part in a study on the impact of COVID-19 on families with children who have a SEND and who had agreed to be contacted about future studies (Asbury et al., 2021). Specific data on socioeconomic status and educational attainment levels were not recorded for this study.

**Table 4:** *Child demographics of Study Three*

Parent pseudonym	Child sex	Age	School Year	Transition from	Transition to
Ella	M	7	3	Mainstream Primary	Mainstream Primary
Evelyn	M	10	6	Mainstream Primary	Special Primary
Bonnie	M	10	6	Special Primary	Special Primary
Sylvia	M	11	7	Mainstream Primary	Mainstream Secondary
Sammy	M	11	7	Mainstream Primary	Mainstream Secondary
Katie	M	11	7	Mainstream Primary	Special Secondary
Nicky	M	11	7	Special Primary	Special Secondary
Mollie	M	12	Not stated	Special Not stated	Home school
Maria	M	12	7	Mainstream Primary	Mainstream Secondary
Aishah	M	14	9	Special Secondary	Special Secondary
Erika	M	14	10	Mainstream Secondary	Special Secondary
Jenny	M	16	12	Special Secondary	Mainstream College
Lauren	F	16	11	Mainstream Secondary	Special Secondary
Lauren	M	18	13	Mainstream Secondary	Special College

*Note.* Lauren participated in two separate interviews about her son and her daughter. The choice was made to keep Lauren's pseudonym the same for both children as her experiences will be intertwined and therefore cannot be discussed as two completely separate experiences

### **7.3.4 Data Collection**

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with parents of autistic children who had transitioned between educational settings during COVID-19. Participants were invited by email to take part in an online interview and asked to return a consent form to the researchers in advance. Interviews took part on a prearranged date via Zoom either myself or Aimee Code, another author on the study. A semi-structured interview guide, developed by study author Kathryn Asbury, was used to shape the interview. The full interview schedule can be found in Appendix N.

The duration of the interviews was, on average, 45 minutes, and all interviews were conducted over the course of two weeks in December 2020 via Zoom. Interviews were carried out at the end of the first term in the new school as it was hoped that, by then, any transient difficulties would have passed but the memory of transition would be recent. Interviews were recorded onto the University of York cloud and then transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcriptions ensured that the intended meaning of participants' accounts was not lost.

Participants were made aware prior to the interview that the interview would be recorded and were reminded of this at the beginning of the call. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study before and after the interview and were advised that they could stop at any time. On completing the interview participants were informed that they could request a copy of the transcript within two weeks of the interview taking place. After this time all transcripts would be anonymised.

### **7.3.5 Analysis**

Analysis was guided by the six-phase process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021). A full description of the process can be found in Chapter 4. Data analysis was carried out solely by myself and began with reading and re-reading the interview transcripts several times in order to be fully immersed in the data. Notes relating to analytic ideas or observations were made in relation to the individual data item and the dataset as a whole.

Codes were developed by systematically working through the entire dataset. Segments of data which were thought to be relevant or meaningful were identified and given code labels. Code labels were collated, and relevant segments of data were compiled for each code. Initial themes were generated by compiling codes which shared core concepts or ideas. Themes were then reviewed and refined, ensuring that they were built around a strong core concept, before being named. Throughout the whole process, the first author engaged with reflexivity via the use of a reflexive diary. A more in-depth discussion of RTA analysis can be found in Chapter 4.

### **7.3.6 Community Involvement and Positionality**

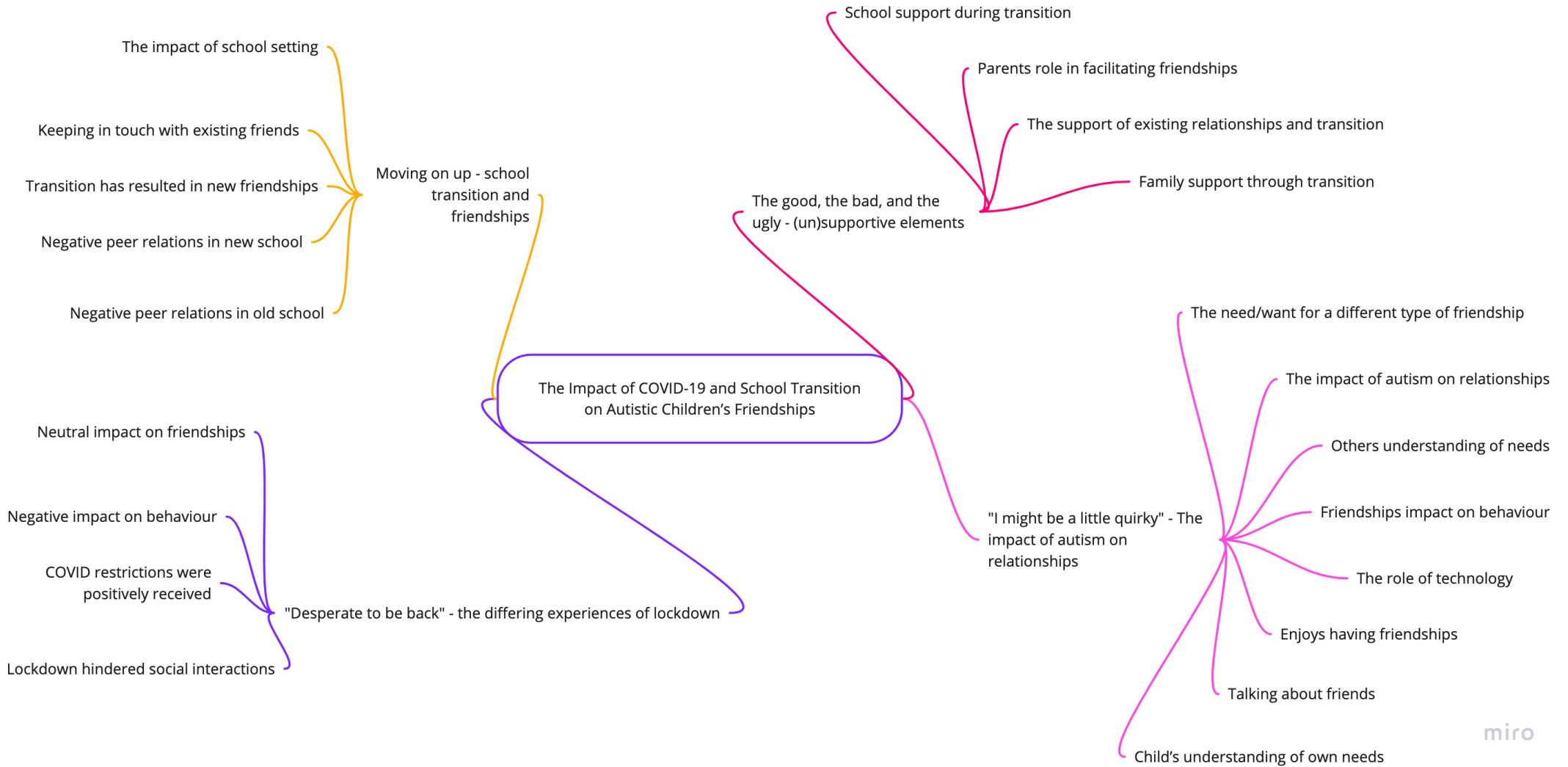
There was no community involvement in the design of the reported study. Reflexive journaling was used by myself during data coding and analysis in order to reflect upon any personal views surrounding autism. As part of this reflexive process, it was acknowledged that there were factors and experiences that influence my views of autism. As discussed in Chapter 2, my understanding of autism is influenced by the neurodiversity movement, and I have experience working with autistic children in a mainstream secondary school. This experience includes supporting children during the transition into secondary school, which may have made me particularly aware of the difficulties some autistic children face during school transition. While acknowledging this positionality every effort was made to ensure the data was represented through the lens of the participants.

### **7.4 Results**

Four themes were identified within the data: Moving on up – school transition and friendships; The good, the bad, and the ugly – (un)supportive elements for transition; “I might be a little quirky” – The impact of autism on relationships; “Desperate to be back” – the differing experiences of lockdown. The four themes and their codes are presented in Figure 21.



**Figure 22:** *Thematic map of Study Three themes*



#### 7.4.1 Moving on Up – School Transition and Friendships

The impact that moving to a new school had on friendship was discussed by all participants, regardless of the type of transition or age of the child. Parents spoke about how their children's friendships had changed as a result of transitioning to a new school and the impact a new school setting had on these relationships. Half of parents expressed that the move to a new school had helped their child to make new friends. For example, Maria described the relief she felt upon learning that her child had managed to make friends after the move to mainstream secondary school:

He made friends instantly which I think is great because that was my biggest worry because I know what he's like he's very 'me', he comes across as 'what I say goes' it's 'all about me and you have to do what I tell you to do' so I was a bit worried.

Similarly, for Sammy, the move to a new school provided an opportunity for her son to move away from peer problems in his old school which was seen as a positive experience: "It's been fantastic because he's been able to leave that crowd behind".

However, for those with children transitioning from one special school setting to another, the development of new friendships appeared different. Only one parent mentioned, with uncertainty, that their child had made new friends: "I think he's got some friends at school" (Aishah) and others did not discuss the development of new friendships at all, speaking more of the peer interactions children had rather than friendships.

Keeping in touch with existing friends was an important factor during transition for many, and for some, friendships were maintained even when children had moved to different schools: "He's kept in touch with some of his friends, there's a couple of girls that were really smashing lasses" (Sammy). Lauren spoke of her experience of her daughter feeling extremely isolated when her friend transitioned to a new school before her:

She had one friend at mainstream and that friend actually left in December, so that's when her attitude got worse because she had no one to talk to at all, she had no friends, she was isolating herself, she wouldn't talk to anybody, and it got to the stage where I don't think even the teachers could actually get anything out of her.

This was a common theme amongst the children and young people, and parents noted that some did not want to make new friends after the transition as their existing friends were all that they wanted: "he was like 'no I don't want to make new ones I've got the ones I've got and that's all I want'" (Erika).

The experiences above suggest that some parents believe that their children value friendships and they are missed when access is removed, highlighting the important role of friendships during transition. Parents whose children had transitioned from any setting into a special school discussed the impact they felt the school setting had on their children's peer relationships more frequently than those attending a mainstream school, expressing that they believed children and staff were more understanding which allowed their children to gain confidence in interacting with peers:

They're a lot more understanding because a lot of them have different issues of dyslexia or autism, so they're kind of already more empathic than a general class of 30. So, it's a nicer environment for him to be in (Katie)

The interviews with these parents highlight how varied experiences can be across individuals and settings. Some parents expressed their relief that a new school had provided opportunities and suitable support for new friendships to blossom, while others discussed concern for the difficulties children were still having, even after the move.

#### 7.4.2 “I Might Be a Little Quirky” – The Impact of Autism on Relationships

The impact of being autistic on children’s friendships was raised by all parents. For some, the differing expectations of what their child thought friendship should be was seen as a barrier: “he’s not big on friendships. He doesn’t have typical friendships, I guess, being autistic [...] he’s not got that kind of bond with people, with his peers” (Katie). For Nicky, the added stressors of her son bringing home friends from his special school setting for playdates also acted as a barrier: “Playdates with SEN kids are, they’re difficult, because you’re doubling your stress levels by having two of them in the house”.

Nicky also described how her son’s needs, combined with attending a mainstream school, had impacted on his relationships with his peers and his academic work due to being removed from the classroom on a regular basis:

He was in mainstream for Key Stage 1 but it got to the point where he was spending more time outside of the classroom with his TA than he was with his peers, and so he wasn’t engaging in anything they were doing because he was the only one doing it.

Having peers that are understanding of their child’s needs was important for some parents and this was more often expressed by those who had children attending mainstream schools. Parents said that having friends who were patient and understanding was beneficial to their child, and that knowing their child had friends that understood and shared their experience of having additional needs was a positive: “It’s lovely, because they all understand each other, and they just accept each other, and that’s what you need. You just need people to accept you for who you are, and they love you for who you are” (Sammy).

For some parents, it was difficult to talk about how the transition had impacted their child’s new friendships as their children were reluctant to talk about their peers. Many children and young people only spoke about others in their new school to report feelings of negativity or disagreements: “yes but only in a negative way really, so yeah, I’d

say only because things are going wrong” (Bonnie). However, some children did openly discuss friendships with their parents who expressed that they enjoyed having the opportunity to be social.

For those children with existing or new friendships, parents noted that they chose to socialise with their friends through the use of technology and for some, this was a new form of socialising as a result of the pandemic: “We got him a phone in January this year so he’s been able to keep in touch digitally with his friends” (Sammy).

Technology allowed one child to successfully socialise without the need to go out. His parent, Sylvia, spoke about this and her experience of the impact this had on her child’s social anxiety: “because [name] [is] quite reclusive. He doesn’t leave his bedroom really, he engages with his friends on social media, gaming, rather than going out, he’s got very severe social anxiety, so he doesn’t really leave the house”. Although two parents whose children attended special schools did discuss technology, it was much more prominent amongst those attending mainstream schools, and older children tended to use gaming platforms and social media to interact with friends.

The differing needs of autistic individuals are reflected here in the varied experiences parents discussed in relation to how their children’s autism impacted peer relationships during the transition.

#### **7.4.3 “Desperate to be Back” – The Differing Experiences of Lockdown**

All parents described the impact that lockdown had on their children’s friendships and transition. For some, COVID-19 was perceived to have no impact on their children’s friendships: “he doesn’t have any contact with those children outside of school, so when we went into lockdown that wasn’t really any different for him” (Evelyn).

Evelyn was not the only parent who found that social distancing and lockdown had little impact on their child’s interactions with friends. Sammy, a parent whose 11-year-old son transitioned from a mainstream primary to a mainstream secondary echoed Evelyn’s experience: “They didn’t see a lot of their friends outside of school anyway, so in that respect it hasn’t really had an impact”.

For others, lockdown negatively impacted their children's ability to socialise, and parents described their children as desperate to see their friends and be back with peers: "he was so desperate to be back with his class [...] I think [he] just desperately missed them and was desperate to see his friends again" (Bonnie). The restrictions put in place not only hindered children's ability to socialise, but in some cases had a negative impact on their behaviour. Children and young people were reported to be more insular, and parents expressed concern for how lockdown may impact on their child's social skills: "I think the more the, the growing up bit, the social bit more than the work" (Sylvia).

Although lockdown had negatively impacted some children's friendships, positive changes in relation to how transitioning to a new school were being carried out were noted. Reduced contact with peers at school was thought to have enhanced many children's move to a new school:

They've got staggered starts so he doesn't see older children, same for lunch time and playtime, he's just with his year group and they don't have assemblies, so all those sorts of things that he was scared about, [they] haven't needed to be faced really (Sylvia)

Although many challenging experiences were discussed in relation to the impact of COVID-19, it is clear that parents viewed some elements of social distancing as creating a positive environment for their autistic children by allowing them to interact with their peers in a less challenging environment.

#### **7.4.4 The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly – (Un)supportive Elements**

Having existing relationships helped support some children and young people in their move to a new school. For those children who transitioned with their existing friendship group, the move was perceived by parents to be much easier as a result of this: "we couldn't have dreamt for an easier transition for him because he had all of his friends" (Bonnie), suggesting that autistic children who move with a friend may experience more successful transitions.

Parents described how support from the new school also facilitated children's transition by actively enabling individuals to engage with their peers. Maria spoke about how the school were supporting her son with his friendship skills and providing opportunities for him to be with peers through clubs: "the school itself have put a lot of support in place so he does like circle of friends; they've got like a science club they've got; little things that they can do at lunchtime which keeps him going", highlighting the importance of providing children with safe and supportive spaces in which they can engage with peers both during and outside of school hours.

Parents also discussed the role of family support. For Maria, she had provided support in the form of encouraging her child to mix with peers in drama and sports clubs, providing her child with skills to navigate meeting new people during transition:

Everyone's like 'well why have you done that?' and I'm like 'well he's going to go into secondary school and he might not move up with all his friends' [...] but if he knows about it now, it'll make all the transitions a lot easier because if he knows that y'know, you mix and make new friends

For others, support was found in a sibling experiencing the same transition: "he was fine because he was with his brother, they kind of use each other as support, and if he hadn't had him, I don't think he would have been as happy to have gone" (Ella).

Support from existing relationships had facilitated a smoother transition for some children in both mainstream and specialised settings. Family support, however, was more commonly discussed by those whose children were attending mainstream school.

## **7.5 Discussion**

The findings of this study corroborate and expand upon previous research, supporting the important role that friendships can play in supporting transition, and the worries surrounding peer relationships shared by autistic children and their families. Parents in the current study discussed how transitioning to a new school was often supported by the presence of existing friendships and that, in the absence of familiar peers, support from

the new school to encourage children to interact with new peers was well received. This has implications for parents in what to consider when choosing a school, and for schools in terms of how to support incoming autistic students. The wide range of experiences presented here highlights the differing needs of autistic individuals moving to a new school, as some children were reported as flourishing in their new environment, whilst others still endured peer difficulties. The added challenge of COVID-19 impacted many children's ability to engage with their friends, but it was indicated by some parents that the social distancing measures schools adopted were beneficial to their autistic child in the move to a new school. Results will now be discussed by research question, followed by a concluding summary of the findings.

### **7.5.1 Children's Friendships and Transition**

The move to a new school provided some children with the opportunity to leave old friendship groups and peer difficulties behind, something which was well received by parents. Parents talked about how being autistic was both a barrier and a facilitator during transition and how this impacted their children's ability to make and maintain friendships. In line with previous literature, the ability to engage with new peers facilitated new friendships in some children who had struggled to have successful relationships previously (Neal & Frederickson, 2016). However, this was not the case for all, and some parents expressed concern for their children's lack of friends, with the transition disrupting previous relationships. This disruption to relationships and differing responses to transition is in line with transition theory and suggests a need for monitoring the well-being of individual autistic children following a major transition.

Although it was not possible for all children and young people to move with existing friends, for those that did, parents expressed that this was an important factor in a successful transition. Therefore, transition planning should aim to ensure that, if possible, autistic children are placed with an existing friend to help aid a successful transition. This may also be useful guidance to provide to parents at the point of choosing and applying to a new school.



For some, the transition had negatively impacted on their children's friendships. Children were said to have told their parents they were worried about losing existing friends, and the thought of changing friendship groups was concerning. This is in line with previous research finding that transition, and the changes that accompany it is one of particular stress for autistic individuals (Makin et al., 2017). Parents also discussed the worry their children had about being able to 'fit in', similar to findings by Foulder-Hughes and Prior (2014). Therefore, creating an inclusive environment that helps to support children in building and maintaining friendships may be one of importance for autistic individuals after a move to a new educational setting.

In line with previous research, parents expressed that their children had differing expectations of what friendships should be. Calder et al. (2013) found that primary-aged autistic children could be successful in making and maintaining friendships, but that what children considered as a friendship was focused more on companionship than the sharing of emotions. This perspective was shared by parents in the current study who talked about how their children did not have 'typical friendships' and how when interacting with their peers they would enjoy playing games or interacting via gaming consoles. It could be argued that knowing about this want for companionship over a need for sharing emotions with others could influence the social interventions put in place for autistic children when supporting individuals in making successful friendships following a transition from or between primary settings. For example, social interventions could focus on providing safe spaces, such as gaming clubs, in which children can engage in parallel play with peers in which new relationships could be built over time. One parent named the 'Circle of Friends' initiative as a good example of this in her child's school which has recently been found to foster peer acceptance (Schlieder et al., 2014).

Another finding was the need for others to have an understanding of their children's needs. This was especially important if children were in mainstream school. It could be suggested that parents whose children were attending a mainstream setting were more aware of others' understanding, given that their children were more likely to be friends with non-autistic peers than those attending a special setting. Educating the

school community and raising awareness of autism may be an essential step in supporting autistic children to successfully build relationships after moving school (Kucharczyk et al., 2015).

Although parents supporting young people transitioning between or out of secondary school settings did share experiences with those moving from and between primary settings, there were some experiences specific to this age group. Parents expressed their concerns about the lack of friends their child had and how this negatively impacted their child. It could be suggested that parents of older children are more aware of their child's lack of friendships as at this age is it typical for adolescents to shift to relying more on peer relationships compared to family support (Lam et al., 2014). This may not be the case for autistic adolescents and studies have found that peer difficulties increase at this age, with peers being less understanding of their additional needs (Locke et al., 2010) which may result in parents being more conscious of their children's friendship groups, or a lack of friends.

Unlike parents of younger children, those of adolescents did not discuss any positive impacts of lockdown. As older children were already accustomed to being in larger educational establishments the move into a new setting may have been less overwhelming compared to those moving from primary to secondary. It may also suggest that, as adolescents rely more heavily on their social network compared to younger children, the absence of friends during lockdown was more challenging for young people, suggesting that adolescents require more support if future lockdowns or restrictions are brought into place.

Another finding specific to those supporting older children in a special setting was the role parents played in facilitating their children's friendships. Parents spoke of 'getting kids together' and how moving schools encouraged parents to be more proactive in ensuring their children met with friends. Support aimed at parents may be beneficial in helping them to find groups or activities that they can attend to support their children's friendships.

Many experiences were shared at the group level; however, just as autistic individuals have heterogeneous needs, their parents' experiences differed and appeared to be impacted by school setting. Those whose children were attending mainstream schools spoke in more detail about the importance of family support throughout the transition and the role of technology in supporting existing and new friendships. These parents were also more likely to talk about experiences of difficulties in their children's new school in comparison to those attending a special school, in line with previous studies (Maiano et al., 2016).

For parents whose children transitioned into a special school, the impact of school setting played a much more prominent role in supporting their children to make new friends, and they were more likely to have children whose friendships appeared to be unaffected by COVID-19. Parents of children attending special schools spoke more openly of the impact autistic characteristics, such as poor turn-taking, had on their children's friendships. It could be suggested that these differing experiences may link to the level of needs children have. Those attending special school may have more complex needs than their peers attending mainstream, which may explain why parents were more aware of the impact their children's needs had on making and maintaining friendships. Furthermore, children attending special settings often attend a school outside of their neighbourhood (Andrews, 2018) and those transitioning from a mainstream setting to a special setting may have been more prepared and better equipped with resources to deal with disruption to their friendship groups regardless of COVID-19, given that it would be unlikely that many of their peers from mainstream would be transitioning with them.

### **7.5.2 The Impact of COVID-19**

One further finding of this present study was that COVID-19 had differing impacts on children's friendships. Many parents reported that restrictions and lockdowns had negatively impacted on their children's ability to socialise both inside and outside of school. Children were reported to have missed friends over the time spent away from school, and many expressed the difficulties of being isolated with family members.

However, some elements of COVID-19 were seen as positive. Autistic individuals often have sensory difficulties which can make moving around crowded schools or socialising with large groups difficult (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Changes implemented as a result of the pandemic, including secondary schools adopting a primary model and allowing children to remain in the same classroom throughout the day, were seen as beneficial as they reduced the number of peers children had to interact with throughout the school day. Extra time spent at home was also reported to improve family relationships, and parents commented that sibling relationships had improved and were used to support transition. Although not explicitly stated by parents, social distancing measures could also be seen as facilitating a more suitable environment for autistic children and young people to foster new friendships.

For others, no change was seen in their children's friendships. As autistic children can often have differing expectations of what friendships are, parents expressed that prior to COVID-19 their children had not spent much time socialising outside of the house, and that friendships at school were often for school time only. This could suggest that providing more opportunities for children to socially engage with their peers in the school environment, such as after school clubs or lunch clubs, may be one way to support autistic children to make and maintain friendships.

### **7.5.3 Limitations**

One major limitation of the current study is that the voices and experiences of autistic children were not included. While we believe that parents' experiences are an important angle on the issue of school transition it will undoubtedly be important to also explore this issue with children and young people, and potentially their teachers. This would be an excellent focus for future research. We have gained a rich insight into how a group of parents perceived their children's friendships to have been impacted upon during the transition to a new school in a global pandemic, but including autistic children – and their teachers - would further strengthen our understanding of the impact of transition on friendships and how to provide optimal support.

A further potential limitation is the wide age range of our participants' children. For example, four of the five parents whose children moved from or between secondary settings had children attending special schools which may have impacted on the findings. We have addressed this to some extent by considering the influence of child age and stage on parents' experiences in this discussion. However, it would also be valuable for future research in this area to focus on parents of children at a similar age and stage (as well as on the children themselves and their teachers).

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the impact of COVID-19 on autistic children's friendships during a move to a new school is complex. The findings suggest that autistic children can and do make friends after transitioning to a new school or college, and existing friendships can play a big role in supporting this transition. There were, however, differences not only between school setting and age, but amongst those whose children had had similar transitions.

The differing experiences presented here reinforce the need for a child-centred approach to transitions, with autistic children requiring more tailored and individual support than their non-autistic peers to ensure a successful transition (Fortuna, 2014). Nonetheless, this study – and indeed COVID-19 restrictions – offer some suggestions as to how autistic children might be supported when joining a new school. The study also highlights the benefits of employing qualitative methods in autism research to allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of, in this case, parental perspectives of child friendships, and how they can best support individuals.

It is also worth noting that some parents expressed that their children were often happy to play alone, and that as a result, the COVID-19 pandemic had little impact on their friendships. These experiences highlight that although adults may feel compelled to encourage children to socialise with their peers, not all children will want or need the degree of social involvement that their non-autistic peers do. Parents comments' within this study reflected the experiences expressed by autistic students in previous literature (Calder et al., 2013), raising the importance of listening to parents, as well as to their

children, to gain further understanding of what support is needed to better support autistic children in making and maintaining friendships in a way that is in line with their needs.

Future work should expand upon the current findings by investigating how autistic children experience their friendships through further qualitative, in-depth approaches, to increase our understanding of the role friendships play during transition from the child's perspective. Further exploratory work into how children experience friendships across different educational settings will also be beneficial for gaining a deeper understanding of the role school settings play in fostering autistic children's friendships. Finally, research exploring how autistic children who transitioned during COVID-19 have adjusted to their new school now that social distancing measures have been relaxed would further expand our knowledge of factors which may support social interaction and transition for these individuals.

## **7.7 Funding**

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The next chapter will provide an overall discussion of the findings from all three studies.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusions**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter concludes this doctoral thesis by synthesising the overall findings of my research. The research sought the perspectives of autistic children, their parents, and their teachers to provide a deeper understanding of how autistic children experience friendships, highlighting key differences between child, parent and teacher views and between school types. The study's contribution to the current understanding of autistic children's friendship experiences are discussed here, including their implications for support. The research process, along with the project's strengths and limitations, are then discussed before recommendations for future studies are made.

### **8.2. Autistic Children Can and Do Make and Maintain Friendships, but Their Wants May Be Different to Those of Neurotypical Children**

#### **8.2.1 Ability to Make Friends**

Past literature has highlighted the challenges some autistic children face with making friends and maintaining friendships, with some suggesting that the social differences autistic children experience may lead them to be perceived as wanting to be on their own or showing a preference for solitary play (Portway & Johnson, 2003). The participants across the studies in this thesis painted a different picture and it was clear that many, but not all, children had a want for friendships. Adult and child participants all spoke about

the children's desire to have friendships and the value that they place on these relationships. Parents across all three studies explained how some of their children had successful friendships both at school and at home, challenging past evidence that suggests some children may use proximity as a marker of friendships (Howard et al., 2006). Furthermore, some of these friendships were found to be maintained over time, showing autistic children's ability to maintain friendships with some children in Study 2 having successful friendships across many years. This demonstrates that autistic children can and do have friendships that they deem to be of value, and that these can be maintained over several years and even after school transition.

For some, children went beyond having successful friendships and reported that they had a best friend. As previously discussed, having a best friend can be protective against a number of challenges including bullying (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018), and best friends can help to provide social support and have been found to support school transitions (Bowker et al., 2006). This may be especially important during middle childhood when social structures and networks are changing, and children are beginning to prepare for the move to secondary school.

### **8.2.2 Different Definitions of Friendships**

Across studies, adults and children described a difference in the type of friends autistic children had and wanted. Adults throughout reported that they believed children had 'non-typical' friendships with many discussing unusual types of gameplay and a strong preference for being in control. This highlights how many adults show a preference for, or bias towards, neurotypical forms of friendship. It was also clear that some children did indeed prefer friends who were compliant and happy to take part in activities that autistic children had suggested. Having the structure of being in control of activities is likely a coping mechanism for autistic children, as this way they are able to initiate games that they know the rules of or suggest activities that are based on their key interests.

Literature shows that autistic children often use shared interests as a key marker of friendships (Ryan et al., 2021) and therefore children may need support with taking turns and allowing others to talk about and suggest activities that are based on their interests, as



being compliant consistently may be challenging for peers and result in friendship breakdowns.

The things that children wanted from their friendships varied across the participants. For example, children in Study 1, the systematic review, showed a preference for companionship over the sharing of emotions, however, when asked directly about their experiences and wants in Study 2, some children expressed a want for emotional connection with peers, not just companionship. Although many children across the studies did call for companionship, understanding that some children may want more from these relationships is important. Crucially, asking children about their wants in a way that they can access (e.g. through accessible research methods or by using children's preferred communication style) may change the ways we understand friendship wants. For example, many studies in the systematic review did not focus directly on children's experiences, using adult reports or observations instead. Therefore, there is already a level of interpretation from adults as to what children show a preference for in their friendships. This research within this thesis shows that by allowing children to engage in research in more creative ways, they may be better able to express their views and provide us with a deeper understanding of their friendship experiences.

Although there were differences between children regarding whether they valued emotional connectedness or not, one common theme across the studies was children's preference for playing games that are more often associated with children of a younger age. Research has found this preference to be widespread among autistic children (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010), and understanding that playing with others is a valued part of friendship for autistic children needs to be a priority to key adults. As children move through primary school, the importance of play tends to be overtaken by academic priorities and the assumption that children wish to engage with more mature forms of social interactions. Providing autistic children with space to play, possibly with younger year groups if appropriate, may help children to form friendships based on this preference for younger play. If possible, providing a space for autistic children to play with other

autistic children may also be beneficial, not only in supporting children to make friends with others who have similar play preferences, but in providing them with a time in which they don't need to mask their communication differences which may be a welcomed break, particularly for those attending mainstream settings.

There was also a want for smaller friendship groups or having a single friend with this topic being mentioned by adults and children across all studies. This did differ amongst child participants with some children expressing a want for large numbers of friends, although these reports were in the minority. Given the challenges many children face with social communication, it is unsurprising that most children showed a preference for having a smaller friendship group. Engaging and navigating larger groups requires an understanding of complex social networks, something which likely becomes more prominent in middle childhood. It could be suggested that children may find this overwhelming and therefore wanting to have fewer social connections may make maintaining friendships easier to manage for the children in this study. Understanding this want is important for support design, as some interventions focus on the promotion of large friendship groups which may be undesirable for some autistic children, such as the circle of friends.

### **8.3 Key Challenges in Autistic Children's Friendships**

Although a large proportion of the children involved in this thesis were reported to have successful friendships, there were key areas of challenge that were highlighted by both adults and children. The need to be in control and to have compliant friends was seen as a barrier by adults, and some were concerned that children's friends may become tired of being 'bossed around'. As discussed above, this preference for being in control is likely linked to autistic children's challenges with social communication, with children wanting to be in control of choosing the game or centring gameplay around an interest of theirs. However, as children age and social networks become more complex, it could be suggested that this need for control will be increasingly detrimental to relationships (Conn, 2014; Warren et al., 2021), and may be a key area that children need support with as they may be at risk of being excluded from friendships as a result.

Across the studies, children who had been excluded from friendship groups described how this had resulted in loneliness, something which was corroborated by adult participants. For some children, they were often found to be socially isolated, especially at break time and many reported that they did not know 'what to say' or how to initiate conversations with peers. It was clear that being socially isolated from peers was not a choice for many of the children, and they showed a want for inclusion and to make friends but were unable to initiate the interaction. It could be suggested that some adults may believe that this social isolation is intentional, as one key characteristic of autism is difficulty with developing peer relationships (APA, 2013), and therefore children may miss out on sufficient support. Speaking with children highlights the differing needs and preferences of individuals and including children in their own support plans in meaningful and practical ways may be a good mechanism for overcoming these challenges. Furthermore, reducing exclusion should be a priority as loneliness in childhood has been linked to depression in adolescents (Witvliet et al., 2010), highlighting the importance of supporting younger children's social relationships.

Finally, the negative impact of prevalent social norms was spoken about by children of all genders. Although research has shown that girls are more likely to be impacted by social norms, often resulting in masking behaviours (Cook et al., 2018; Sedgewick et al., 2019), within this project all children were aware of these norms, the impact these had on their friendships, and that their friendships preferences often made them different from their peers. Research has shown the detrimental impact of having to fit into social norms can have on autistic individuals' identity development and their well-being (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Cooper et al., 2023). The current research shows that even young autistic children are aware of social pressures and feel the need to often modify their behaviour in order to fit in. Having more inclusive and understanding environments for autistic children may help to reduce this feeling of being on the outside and allow children to form friendships which they value and in which they are valued as themselves, as opposed to trying to form neurotypical friendships.

#### **8.4 Differences in Child and Adult Perspectives**

One aim of this project was to explore if the perspectives of children differed from those of the key adults in their lives. Though many key wants and needs of autistic children were discussed by adults and children, there were areas that differed between perspectives. Adults reported that some children did not have reciprocal friends, often stating that children believed they had friendships with peers when in fact, they believed they were one-sided. This was not, however, an issue discussed by children at all. This could suggest that autistic children are unaware that their friendships are not reciprocated and may mean that it is not a concern for them. Children may be happy with believing that people are their friends. For example, many adults spoke of how social interactions could be fleeting, with children spending time with peers in certain situations, such as at the park. For children, these interactions were sometimes classed as friendships to them, further suggesting that their wants may be different to the perceptions of adults and showing evidence that some children do base their friendships on proximity. Furthermore, best friends were discussed by children throughout the study, but not by adults, further adding to the suggestion that adults may not accurately interpret children's friendship status.

The teaching of neurotypical social skills as a way of supporting children's friendships was only spoken about by adults. Children did not call for help with changing their behaviours, but they did acknowledge the challenges social norms could have. This may be because adults are more attuned to neurotypical norms and the behaviours that are classed as 'normal' or 'appropriate' for engaging with peers in mainstream settings, whereas for children, their own behaviours are their norms. This further highlights the challenges surrounding teaching social skills and implies that some adults believe neurotypical forms of friendships are correct when doing so may be detrimental to autistic children.

Finally, there were key differences between teachers and the issues parents and children discussed. Firstly, teachers placed an emphasis on children's behaviours being the main barrier to friendships, whereas parents often focused on the challenges

surrounding children's diagnoses. It is likely that teaching staff spend more time around children engaging with peers, and therefore pick up on more behavioural challenges than parents, who may spend more time with their child on their own or with siblings. It could also be because many school-based interventions focus on the changing of behaviours and therefore school staff automatically focus on behaviours due to past experiences. Secondly, although raised by parents and children, teachers did not discuss the lack of support available for autistic children and their social needs. Some did discuss the need for improvement, but there was a discrepancy between the support school staff felt was available and how children and parents reported this. Finally, teachers did not talk about the absence of perceived successful friendships, despite children in the studies expressing that they had difficulties. This has implications for using teacher reports in isolation as they may not accurately reflect the friendship status of children. It was notable that teachers reported being more satisfied with the friendships autistic children had than children themselves or their parents, possibly because of a wish to defend their school and classroom environment.

### **8.5 School Differences in Experiences**

Although Study 2 was unable to recruit a good sample of children from special schools, parents and teachers were able to provide their perceptions of the impact school settings may have on autistic children's friendships. There were differences between school types with regard to the impact that being autistic had on children's social interactions. Adults believed that children attending mainstream settings encountered difficulties due to their social skills, something which was evidenced at playtime with children struggling with rules and being unable to pick up on the nuances of social networks. The teaching of neurotypical social skills to overcome these challenges was also spoken about by those working in mainstream settings, but not those in special schools. It may be that for adults working in a special school setting, or for parents who support autistic children in special schools, the lack of neurotypical peers in school means that comparisons are not as common, or not needed. Therefore, the social skills of autistic children are not necessarily seen as an area that needs to be changed, with adults working to support children as

opposed to making them 'fit in'. This supports the double empathy problem by highlighting how the onus is often on autistic children to change their behaviour and communication preferences to fit into a non-autistic environment. Another example of this is the use of masking to minimise challenges with social interactions being only spoken about by those attending mainstream schools and children were reported to be more aware of being different compared to their peers in special settings. This may, again, be because children attending mainstream are more aware of their differences, given that they are predominantly surrounded by non-autistic peers. This is in line with previous research which has highlighted the prevalence of masking behaviours in mainstream settings compared to those in special schools (Cook et al., 2018).

Adults of children attending special schools spoke less of social exclusion, and many discussed the opportunities that children had for engaging with peers who had similar needs and wants as opposed to always only being around children of a similar age. This may be particularly important for friendship development given children's preference for homophily and their want for engaging in games that may be deemed for 'younger children'. In the absence of having peers who were similar to themselves in terms of needs, mainstream children were seen to use similar interests to support their friendship development, an area that was not discussed by those in special schools. Furthermore, those attending specialised settings reported facing fewer challenges and receiving more appropriate support, with parents reporting that staff and students in the schools were often more understanding. However, support was reported to be lacking across mainstream schools and resource bases, in line with previous research (Crane et al., 2022).

Finally, differences were not just between settings, but within settings. Some autistic children had a successful time attending a mainstream setting and others were unable to maintain friends because of the lack of opportunities to be around peers with similar needs or challenges with engaging with peers who had differences in maturity levels/communication preferences. Therefore, it is important not only to consider the differences in experiences between settings, but to pay close attention to individuals

within the same setting to ensure that all children are receiving sufficient and appropriate support.

## **8.6 Gender Differences in Experiences**

Gender differences were found across the studies within this project and in line with previous literature (Cook et al., 2018). Girls were reported to place more of an emphasis on wanting to fit in with their peers, often resulting in an increased use of masking. Studies have shown that adolescent girls report masking behaviours to be a coping mechanism which is often used to aid with friendship development (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Unfortunately, this can be at the expense of autistic individuals' mental health (van der Putten et al., 2023), and therefore supporting girls in not feeling the need to mask consistently at school may be beneficial to their well-being in the longer term.

Furthermore, girls appeared to be more concerned about their friendships than boys. This is not to say that boys were not motivated to make friends, but they appeared to attach less pressure to making and keeping friends than girls did. Girls expressed that they felt the need to have friends and spoke about social norms more often than boys. This finding is corroborated by past research which highlighted how autistic adolescent girls were more concerned with and placed more value on neurotypical friendship norms, whilst boys had less motivation and were less concerned with the need to make and keep friends (Sedgewick et al., 2019; Sedgewick et al., 2016). This shows that younger children may feel just as much pressure as their adolescent peers to conform to social norms.

## **8.7 Contribution to the Current Literature**

### **8.7.1 Autistic Children Can Take Part in Research About Their Own Experiences**

Previous research has highlighted some of the challenges of working with younger children, specifically those with additional needs. Traditional methods often rely on language ability and interpersonal communication, something which is likely challenging to some autistic children (Preece & Jordan, 2010), often meaning that they are excluded

from research, with researchers opting to use adult reports or observations. This thesis used two novel forms of data collection to help facilitate autistic children's engagement with the project.

Firstly, the use of scrapbooks in Study 2 was well received by children of all abilities and for those who were able to engage in the interviews, they worked as successful prompts. Children expressed their enjoyment about taking part in the research (many added brief monologues about taking part at the end of their interview) with some children wanting to keep the activities as mementoes. This shows that autistic children can take part in research and that they value having their voices and opinions heard, but that researchers may need to rethink the ways in which they design data collection tools. Allowing children the flexibility to complete the scrapbook and interviews in a way that they found preferable was also found to be successful. Many children opted for their parents to help with writing out responses in the space provided, but some engaged via drawings which were expanded upon during the interviews and others found the use of playdough to be a preferable way for creating models and pictures that helped to document their experiences. The use of scrapbooks also meant that if children did find engaging with interviews, or certain interview questions challenging, that data was still available in the form of written words and drawings, which could go on to be independently analysed.

Secondly, the main project (Study 2) used remote, parent-led interviews. This was originally done because of restrictions in place due to COVID-19, however, it was seen to be beneficial by myself and parents for a number of reasons. Allowing children to speak with a familiar member of their family likely reduced the power dynamic which is often found in qualitative research (Punch, 2002). Having a trusted adult ask questions about a sensitive topic, such as friendship, meant that children opened up much more quickly than they might have done if I had visited schools or their homes to speak with them directly. Furthermore, parents expressed that being able to talk to their children about their friendships was something that they valued, and it gave them an insight into some challenges their children were facing that they had not been aware of before the study.



The remote option also meant that parents and children could take part in the study at a time convenient to them and that the interview could be broken down into parts. This helped with children's attention, as they did not need to sit and engage with the interview for a long amount of time, and parents could pause or stop the interview if children needed a break or were finding the interview difficult. This would not have been as appropriate if using a traditional method with a researcher.

Finally, the combination of the scrapbooks and the interview appeared to be supportive for some children. Being able to refer back to the scrapbook during the interview and use their own words and drawings as prompts was evident throughout the recordings and appeared to reduce children's need to recall large amounts of information. Therefore, future studies may benefit from the use of child created prompts in exploring children's experiences of potentially sensitive topics.

### **8.7.2 Support**

The findings of this doctoral project have raised some key points that need to be considered when designing and implementing support for autistic children. It was clear that there was a large need for more education surrounding autism. Adults and children expressed how having other people understand the condition and how it may impact on children's social communication and friendship desires should be a priority. Specifically, the need for peers to be more understanding was raised by parents and children and therefore including interventions that support non-autistic children in adapting their social communication to include autistic children may be beneficial. This would also reduce the pressure on autistic children to conform to social norms and in turn, increase well-being. Increasing peer awareness has been found to reduce stigma and change peers' attitudes towards autistic children (Gus, 2000). Curricula such as LEANS (Alcorn et al., 2021), a project aimed at educating primary-aged children about neurodiversity, or the upcoming Belonging in Schools project from the University of Cambridge which aims to provide resources to support inclusive school properties, may both be good ways to promote inclusive and understanding across schools.

There was also a prominent theme throughout that highlighted the role parents play in supporting and facilitating friendship. Children throughout the study acknowledged the ways in which parents helped friendships by setting up play dates, and parents were often attuned to the needs of their children, supporting them in attending social clubs or encouraging them to play with others in the park. This was something which some parents also spoke about, often with reference to the challenges that were involved with organising social meet-ups. Some parents expressed that they were aware their children had different friendship wants compared to neurotypical children, and that changing their understanding of what friendships look like had helped them to better support their child. Therefore, education for parents on the differing definitions and wants of autistic children may help them to support their children and reduce the number of children who are encouraged to have friendships they don't want or don't look like neurotypical ones. Study 2 shows that parents are able to engage in conversations with their children about friendships using scrapbooks as prompts and therefore creating an activity focussed on friendships for parents and children to work on together may support this education.

One key area that was found to be supportive for autistic children was the use of shared interests. Online gaming and the use of technology were supportive for many, with some making new friends and maintaining current friends through gaming platforms. It could be that providing support for safely engaging with online communities may therefore be something which is beneficial in the development and maintenance of autistic children's friendships. Gaming in person was also found to be supportive, specifically the use of structured play. Understanding children's preference for structured play could be useful for school staff when supporting students at break time. Interventions that focus on the use of structured play to initiate peer relationships may be beneficial for primary-aged autistic children, and a form of support that is likely low-cost and easy to implement. This preference for play over talking also has implications for the use of play-based interventions, which autistic children may find more inclusive than traditional methods. It may also be a good place to support children in developing their

turn-taking skills, an area that was identified as a challenge by adults in the study, especially when children wanted to be in control of gameplay and conversation topics. Given the usefulness of shared interests, schools may also benefit from providing autistic children with spaces in school where they can meet others with similar interests, such as a games club at lunch time. Furthermore, recent research has highlighted how autistic adults reflected on how they preferred to play with similar autistic people or to play near others (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2023) and providing a space for this may also be beneficial to autistic children.

As discussed in Chapter 2, peer mentoring is often used to buddy autistic children up with neurotypical peers to support inclusion. However, parents in this study reported that peer mentoring had led to peer difficulties for some children, with schools not thinking sufficiently carefully about who they were being paired up with. On one occasion, the intervention had led to an increase in bullying. If buddy systems are to be implemented by schools, it may be that autistic children should be consulted beforehand. Firstly, this will allow children to express if they want to be involved in such a mentoring programme, as not all children express a want to fit in or have friends and forcing peers on them may actually be detrimental to their well-being. Secondly, speaking with children will give them the opportunity to suggest who they may want to be buddied up with and who they may have difficulties with. It is important that not only are autistic children asked about their want to engage in peer mentoring, but peers are also asked as being forced into supporting autistic students may lead to negative interactions.

## **8.8 Limitations**

One major limitation of this research is the lack of autistic children's voices from special schools. Although every effort was made to ensure that the methods used were inclusive, children attending special schools found engaging with the parent-led interviews extremely challenging, resulting in only one interview being returned. This interview included a lot of echolalia and it was evident that the questions provided for parents would have benefited from being broken down into simpler questions in order for them to be accessible. Although all participants were required to have an EHCP and for parents

to confirm that children were verbal upon signing up for the project, it may be that the language skills children in special schools had were lower than those of their mainstream peers, or that their social and communication challenges were more profound. As the methods were piloted with a child attending mainstream school, and informed by colleagues who had SEND experience but within mainstream settings, it could be that they were not an appropriate level for those attending special schools or for those with more complex needs. Spending time within special schools exploring children's communication preferences, and incorporating these into future research would be one way of overcoming these challenges.

Further to this, the voices of autistic children who are minimally or non-verbal are not present in this research. Due to the time limitation on doctoral projects, and the challenges faced by designing the project during COVID-19, there was not time nor were the resources available to make the project inclusive of those who did not communicate verbally. It is all too common in research for those who do not verbalise their experiences in traditional ways to be excluded from research, with many opting to include their experiences via parents or teachers (Reed et al., 2012). Although parents are likely the most attuned to their children's needs and therefore play an important role in helping us to understand their children's experiences, more needs to be done to allow non-verbal and minimally verbal children to take part in research. The project would have benefited from including these voices, as all children are likely to have their own opinions on friendships and the support that they need. Going forward, inclusive methods that use augmentative and alternative communication may help us to gain a broader understanding of how autistic children experience friendships.

Although parent-led interviews were a major strength in regards to their flexibility and ease of use, they came with challenges. Firstly, parents have multiple priorities and time can be scarce, especially for those with children who have additional needs. This meant that although a large number of activity packs were sent out, only a small number were returned as parents often struggled to find time to complete the interviews, especially as schools began to open again after lockdown. The remote

interviews also meant that I was not able to probe responses that were particularly interesting and relevant to the project. This sometimes was frustrating when children began to speak about a pertinent topic but parents moved on to the next question as instructed. Creating more detailed interview schedules may be one way to overcome this challenge.

As discussed in section 7.5.3, the lack of autistic children's and young people's voices in Study 3 was a major limitation. Including autistic children and their teachers in the final study would have helped to strengthen our understanding of the impact of transition on friendships and how to provide optimal support.

Finally, the overall project would have benefited from more participatory approaches so that autistic individuals could help to highlight key areas that may be of interest to the community. Including the voices of autistic individuals at all stages of research can ensure that the research investigates areas of priority for autistic people and steps away from only including the autistic community as participants. This helps to reduce the traditional power imbalance between research and participants and ensure that the research being done is meaningful and relevant to the community. Although I have experience of working with autistic children, and have close relationships with autistic children via friendships, it must be acknowledged that the research would have benefitted from the input of autistic individuals.

## **8.9 Future Research**

Based on the findings of this research, there are multiple areas that would benefit from further research. The studies have found that autistic children can and do make and maintain friendships, but that these friendships look different to those of their non-autistic peers. More research is needed to understand the nuances of these friendships. For example, future research would benefit from working more closely with primary-aged autistic girls, as it was clear that their experiences differed from those of boys in the study, and that their voices are largely missing from the research more generally. Although there is research exploring the differences girls experience (Cook et al., 2018;

Halsall et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2018), the voices of younger children are missing.

There were also differences in the experiences of children who were towards the end of their primary school journey. Given the importance of friendships in supporting transition (Ng-Knight et al., 2019), more research into the experiences of children in Years 5 and 6 may help us to better understand the challenges they face in the run-up to this major move, and how to best support them. This is especially important given the changes in social networks that are happening within this age range, and the likelihood that their friends will be moving towards more mature friendship preferences, whilst they may still be focused on play.

Finally, future research must aim to include the experiences of non-verbal and minimally verbal children and those attending special schools. Based on the perceptions of adults across this study, it is clear that there are differences between school types for children and creating more inclusive research methods would allow us to further explore these differences from the children's perspective.

### **8.10 Concluding Comments**

This thesis explored the differing experiences of autistic children's friendships, including the perspective of key adults in their lives. Overall, the project highlights the different needs and wants of autistic children, even within similar settings, and the need for better support and better education. Autistic children clearly have their own opinions on their friendships, with some craving large numbers of friends and others being happy on their own or with a pet for company. This shows the importance of speaking with children to give them autonomy over the support they want to receive and how they wish to receive it. Including multiple perspectives allowed for the exploration of different opinions amongst those who are most likely to ask for and implement support, further highlighting the need to include children throughout their support journey.

The project shows the need for more inclusive research methods, specifically those that are able to support the inclusion of children who do not communicate in traditionally verbal ways and has sparked my interest in pursuing that area of research

further. As researchers, we must try harder to make accommodations for the individuals we wish to speak with and, as evidenced through many social support interventions, move away from putting pressure on autistic people to adapt their form of communication to accommodate a predominantly neurotypical world.

## APPENDIX A – Systematic Review Search Strings

<p>Autis* OR Asperger* OR "Autism Spectrum Disorder" OR "Autism Spectrum" OR "Autism Spectrum Condition" OR Autistic Chil* OR ASD OR ASC</p>	<p>AND</p>	<p>child* OR "School child*" OR "primary school" OR "junior school" OR "elementary school" OR "key stage one" OR "key stage two" OR KS1 OR KS2</p>	<p>AND</p>	<p>"educational setting" OR "mainstream school" OR "special school" OR "inclusion unit" OR "language unit" OR "language base" OR "specialised school" OR "specialised setting" OR "special education" OR school</p>	<p>AND</p> <p>Friend* OR peer* OR classmate* OR friendship* OR "peer relation*" OR "peer relationship*" OR "social relation*" OR "peer nominations" OR "relationship quality" OR bully* OR relationship*</p>
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APPENDIX B – Scrapbook



My Scrapbook



## Welcome to your Scrapbook!

In this scrapbook we would like to hear all about you and your friends.

This is your book, so you can complete the tasks in whatever way you want to. You can use drawings, write down words and use colours and craft materials.

- There are no right or wrong answers.
- You can stop at any point.
- If you want to pass on a question – you may do so.



If you are happy with everything above please write your name, or draw a happy face in the space below:

# About your Scrapbook.

There are two sections to your scrapbook.

The first section asks you to talk about you. The second section asks you to talk about your friends.

Each section has a title page that can be coloured in if you want to.

Each activity has a 'how to' page before it which can help you to decide how to complete the activity.

The scrapbook has been made for lots of different people to use, so you might find some things really easy, and some bits might be harder.

If you get stuck, try looking at the 'how to' page to see what the task wants you to do, or ask an adult to help explain the task for you.

**REMEMBER!!** You don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to. You can skip them or come back to them later!



All About Me



## All about Me: How to

The next activity is all **about you**. Can you create a profile for yourself using the spaces provided?

There is a box for you to draw a picture of yourself if you want to, and a place for you to write your name.

There is also a place where you can pick your own **nickname!** This can be special to you and doesn't need to be something your friends or people at home call you.

If you don't want to write about your favourite activity, that's ok, you can **draw a picture** or use **craft materials** to fill in the **All About Me** task.

**REMEMBER!!** You don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to. You can skip them or come back to them later!



# All about



Can you draw a picture of yourself or something you like?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Nickname: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

School year: \_\_\_\_\_

Hair colour: \_\_\_\_\_

Update your status: What have you been doing today?

---

---

My Favourite things to do:



# All About My Friends



# What makes a good friend? How to page!

This next section of your book asks you all about friends and what **YOU** think makes a good friend.

On the next page is an outline of a person. You can use whatever you like to colour in the person and make them look like the **best friend you could ever imagine** having!

There are some labels and a glue stick so that you can stick on words that you think **describe** your perfect friend onto the drawing.

**Describe means to say what this person is like (sorry if you already knew that 😊).** If there are other words you think of, you can write them onto the page.



You have also been given some playdough, so if you want to **build** a friend you can. If you want to build a friend, you can still put the words around the friend and ask an adult to **take a photo** of the finished perfect friend. If you don't want to put the words around the friend, you can still stick them to the picture on the next page.

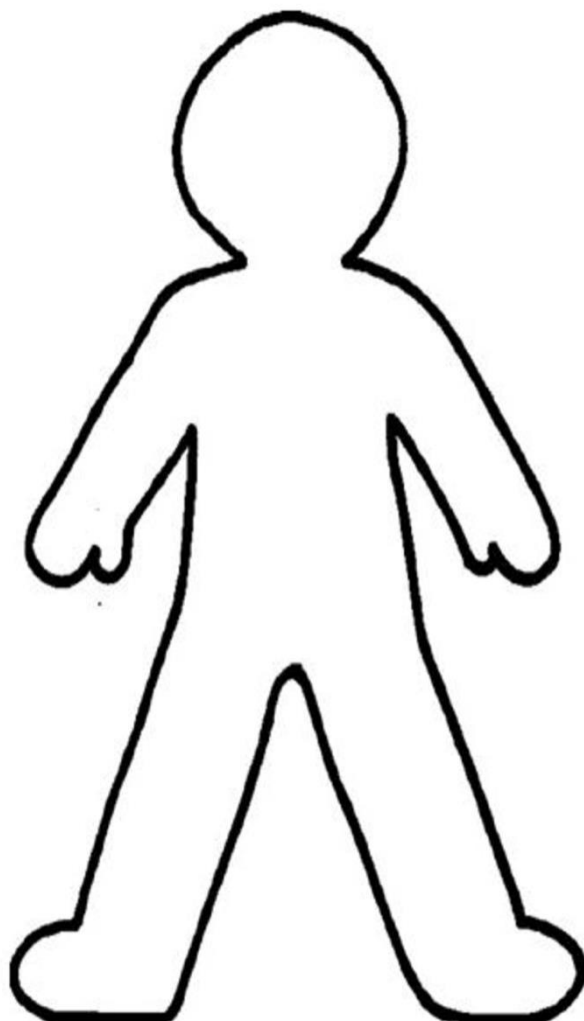


Feel free to do both tasks if you want to and **remember**, there are no right or wrong answers. If you don't want to do this task, that's ok too!



What do you think makes a good friend?

Can you use some of the stickers and craft items to design your perfect friend?



Can you list three reasons why this would be your perfect friend?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What would you like to do with your perfect friend if you were **playing at school?**

What would you like to do with this perfect friend if you were **playing after school?**

# All about my friend: How to

Now you have talked about your *perfect* friend, we would like it if you could tell us about a *real-life* friend you have at school or home.

Can you create a profile for them talking about them in your own words? Can you write down their name and how you met them?

You can *write stories* in the spaces provided or *draw pictures* if you think that is more fun.

**REMEMBER!!** You don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to. You can skip them or come back to them later!



# All about my

Can you pick one **real-life friend** and create a profile for them?

Can you draw a picture of your friend?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

School year: \_\_\_\_\_

How did you meet:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My **favourite** memory with my friend is:

My **favourite** thing to do with my friend is:

When I'm feeling sad or angry, my friend... (helps me, comforts me, ignores me):

I think **I** am a good friend because...

## APPENDIX C – Labels and Emojis

Enjoys reading

Takes turns

Enjoys playing games

Kind

Tells jokes

Naughty

Nice

Cheerful

Has fun

Helpful

Funny

Shares

Let's me join in

Gets me in trouble

Tells the truth

Good at listening

Learns with me

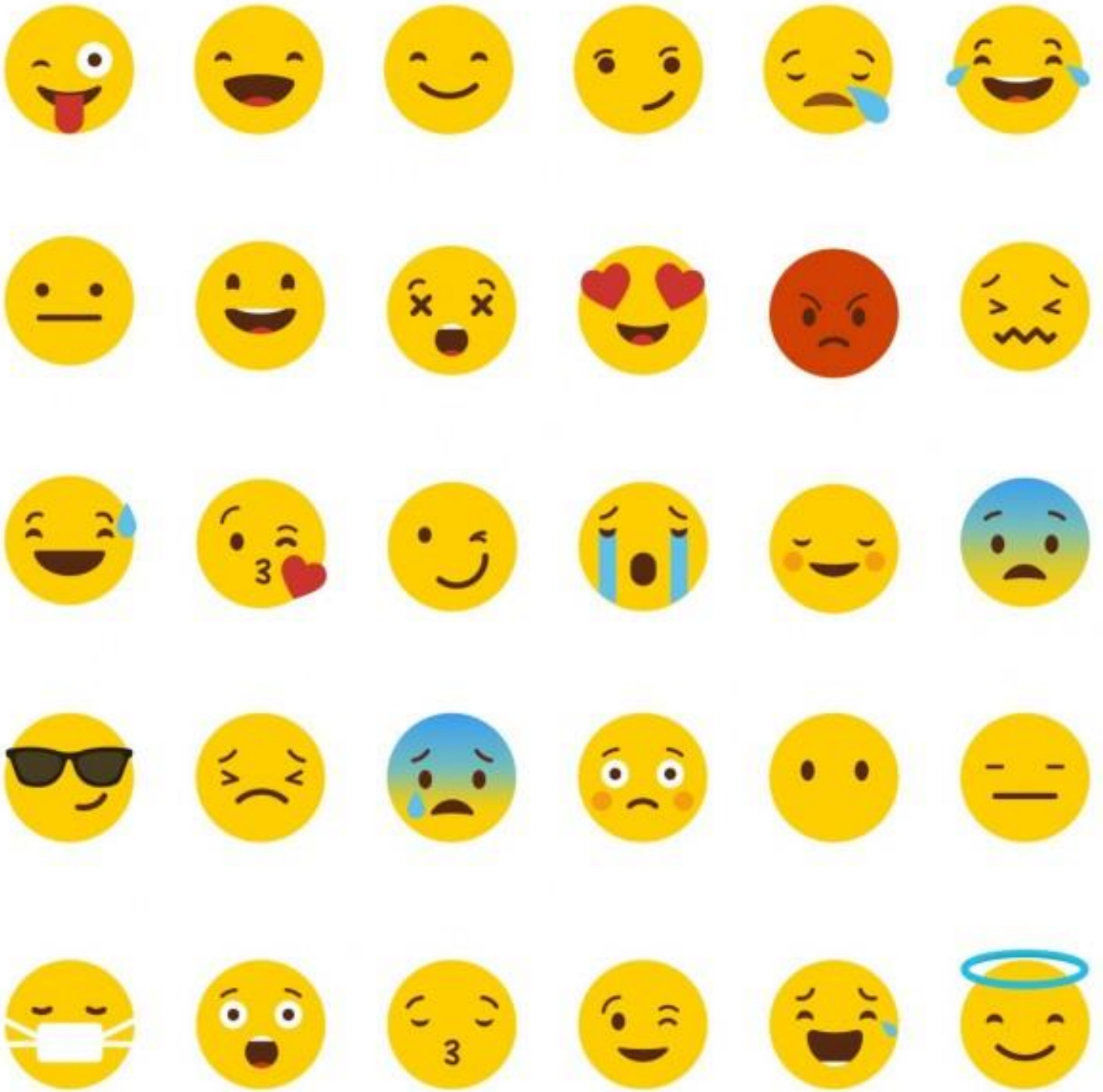
Stays in touch

Caring

Thinks about my feelings

Makes me laugh

Happy



# APPENDIX D – Parent Information Sheet

## Information pack for parents

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study on how children with SENDs experience friendship.

### What this pack contains:

- Interview script
- Information letter for teachers
- Paper copies of the questionnaire
- Scrapbook for your child to complete
- Felt tip pens
- Playdough
- Labels and emoji cut outs
- Glue Stick

### What we would like you to do:

**Task 1:** You have been provided with a scrapbook and some craft items for your child. The scrapbook has been designed so that your child can complete the activities on their own, at their own pace, although some children may need help with reading some of the instructions. If your child finds writing difficult, please feel free to write answers into the spaces provided for them if they ask you to.

At the beginning of each section there is a title page which your child can decorate and colour in if they would like to make the booklet more colourful, but this is totally optional.

If your child becomes stuck on a task, please encourage them to complete it by providing guidance, but please try not to answer the question for them. Some prompts for how the activities may be completed have been provided below.

If your child does not want to answer a question, that is fine, please reassure them that they can miss that question or section.

All about me task



The blank box is for your child to draw a picture of themselves. It is ok if they do not want to draw a picture of themselves, they can draw something that is special to them or simply draw a generic face or stick in a picture of an emoji!

If your child is unsure of a nickname, suggest they think up a funny name, or a name of a favourite TV character or pet.

- ‘What have you been doing today?’ prompts: Provide guidance to what day it is. Is today a school day? Have you been mostly working or mostly relaxing or playing?
- ‘My favourite things to do’ prompts: What do you like to do the most? Can you draw a picture of you doing your favourite things? Do you have a favourite game? *This can be something they like to do on their own, with you, or with their friends/siblings.*

### **What do you think makes a good friend?**

The aim of this task is to help us to understand what your child thinks their perfect friend might look like. There is a stick figure outline provided in the book where your child can add features such as clothes and hair. There are some cut out labels which your child can use to stick on the page to show attributes they think are important, such as being helpful or kind. If your child does not want to use the labels, they can write words that they think describe the friend they have drawn.

If your child prefers more practical tasks, they can use the enclosed playdough to make a model of a friend. Please encourage your child to still select labels that best fit their friend. These can be stuck to the stick figure page or laid around the playdough friend. If your child opts to use playdough please take a photo of their friend model and send it to the researcher along with the interview video.

Two of the tasks in this section ask what your child would like to do with their perfect friend at school and outside of school. If your child asks about social distancing with regards to school playtime and having friends over, please encourage them to think about what they would like to do with this friend if there were no social distancing restrictions in place.

- ‘Can you list three reasons’ prompts: What makes you think that this person would be the best friend ever? What makes you want to be friends with this person?
- ‘What would you like to do with this friend at school’ prompts: What would you like to do with this friend if you were on a break **at school**? Would you be playing indoors or outdoors? Would you be playing with toys or a game?

- ‘What would you like to do with this friend after school’ prompts: What would you like to do with this perfect friend if you were playing **after** school? Would you like your friend to come play at home? Would you be playing in the park?

### **All about my friend**

This section asks about your child’s **real-life** friends. It can be their best friend, if they have one, or someone they enjoy spending time with at school. It could also be a friend that they know from outside school. If your child does not have any close friends that they would like to talk about, encourage them to talk about a person in their class that they work with.

There is a space on the profile for your child to draw a picture of their friend. They can draw a picture of the friend on their own, or one of them together.

- ‘How did you meet’ prompts: Can you remember where you met this friend? Was it at school or somewhere else?
- ‘My favourite memory’ prompts: Have you got a favourite memory of this friend? Have you done something really special with them or something that was really fun? Can you write/draw that in the box?
- ‘My favourite thing to do’ prompts: What do you like to do with your friend? Do you play any games together? How about on the xbox/playstation/computer?
- ‘When I’m feeling sad or angry’ prompts: What does your friend do when you’re upset? Do they help you or do they leave you on your own?
- ‘I think I am a good friend’ prompts: Can you finish the sentence? What makes you a good friend to other people?

**Task 2:**

Record a conversation between you and your child in which you discuss the activities in the scrapbook. More information on the interview can be found in the additional page titled 'Interview prompts'. The interview can be carried out by you, or another adult that the child is comfortable speaking with. We ask that the conversation is video recorded and that your child can be clearly seen. If you wish to be out of the view of the camera, that is ok.

**If your child is not comfortable with participating in the interview, please feel free to complete the interview questions via a different method. If your child would rather answer the questions by writing their responses down, or by allowing you to write down their responses that is fine. Alternatively, if they are happy answering the questions but are not comfortable with being on video, then please feel free to use an audio recording.**

An email will be sent to you which will contain a link to a dropoff service hosted by The University of York. This is a safe and secure way of transferring your video. The video data will also be destroyed when the video has been coded (around 6 months). If you cannot find the link, or the link has expired, please contact the researcher.

**Task 3:** Complete a short questionnaire about yourself, your child, their school and their friends. The questionnaire has been emailed to you in the tracking email, if you are unable to find the questionnaire, please contact Laura who will be able to provide you with a new link. It will automatically save, so you don't have to complete it in one go and should take no longer than 10 minutes. **A paper copy has also been included if you would prefer to complete it by hand which can be returned in the envelope provided.**

There is also a teacher questionnaire included in the pack. If you are able to, please could you ask your child to give this to their class teacher.

Thank you once again for taking part in this research. If you have any questions, please contact the researcher via email at [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk)

# APPENDIX E – Parent-Led Interview Schedule

## Interview Prompts for Discussing the Scrapbook

Please use this prompt sheet to talk to your child about their scrapbook **once it is complete**.

Please try to ask the questions in as similar a way as possible to the suggestions that have been provided. If your child would like to talk about different aspects of the scrapbook or is enthusiastic about one task, please feel free to stay on that section longer. Alternatively, if your child is not happy talking about certain tasks, please skip the questions.

You do not have to discuss each task in order or during one go, but please ensure that all discussions are recorded. Please make sure that your child is visible in the video recording of the interview. **If your child would prefer to answer the questions in writing, please feel free to do so on the spare paper provided. Alternatively, if your child would prefer to not be on camera but is happy to answer the questions verbally then please feel free to provide an audio recording.**

### All about me section:

- This section is all about you. What is it that you're doing here? (in my favourite things to do box)
- Can you tell me why this is your favourite thing to do?
- Why do you enjoy doing that?
- Do you prefer doing that on your own or with friends?

### What do you think makes a good friend?

- Can you tell me all about your perfect friend?
- Did you pick any labels for this friend?
  - Can you tell me why you think the labels you picked make a good friend?
- Why do you think (insert reasons from 'list three reasons') is important?
- Can you tell me what you are doing with this friend at school?
  - Why did you pick that?
  - Do you do that with people at school now?
- What are you are doing after school with your perfect friend?
  - Why do you think that would be a fun thing to do after school?

### All about my friend:

- This bit was all about a real-life friend. Can you tell me who they are?
- Can you remember where you met them?
- Can you tell me about your favourite memory with this friend?
  - What makes this memory special?
- What is your favourite thing to do with your friend?
  - Can you tell me why you like doing that with your friend?
- Does your friend help you when you're sad or angry?
  - Do you think it's important to help your friends if they are sad or angry?
- Do you like talking to new people?
- Do you like meeting new friends?
  - Why do you/don't you like meeting new friends?
- Do you think it's important that **people** have friends?
- Do you think it's important that **you** have friends?

# APPENDIX F – Parent Questionnaire



## Friendship Study - Parent Questionnaire

### How do Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Experience Friendships?

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project investigating how children with SENDs experience friendships. This is a short questionnaire about yourself, your child, their school and their friends. If you have any questions regarding completing the questionnaire, please contact the researcher on [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk)

Thank you for your help with this research.

Participant code:

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## Demographic Questions

Please specify your age

---

Please write your email address (please note that this will only be used to link your responses to your child's data and will be stored separately from your responses)

---

What gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say
- Other

What is your ethnicity?

- White British
- White Non-British (White Irish, White European, White other)
- Black British
- Black / African / Caribbean
- Asian British
- Asian / Indian / Pakistani / Bangladeshi / Chinese
- Mixed / multiple ethnic groups
- Other ethnic group

What is your marital status?

- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Single
- Cohabiting

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- No qualifications
- GCSE/ O-Levels or equivalent
- A-Levels/ BTech or equivalent
- Undergraduate Degree or equivalent
- Postgraduate Degree or equivalent



Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

- Employed full time
- Employed part time
- Unemployed looking for work
- Unemployed not looking for work
- Retired
- Student
- Disabled
- Self-Employed

What is the combined annual income for your household?

- Less than £10,000
- £10,000 - £19,999
- £20,000 - £29,999
- £30,000 - £39,999
- £40,000 - £49,999
- £50,000 - £59,999
- More than £60,000
- Prefer not to answer

How many people (over the age of 18 years) live in your house including yourself?

- 2 or fewer
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6 or more

How many children (under the age of 18 years) do you have living with you?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

## You and Your Child

What is your relationship to the child in the study? For example, mother, step-father, grandmother.

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What gender does your child identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

How old is your child?

---

What school year is your child in?

---

Where there any parts of the scrapbook or interview that your child had difficulties completing?

Yes

No

Which section(s) did your child have difficulties with and what do you think the barriers were for your child completing the task(s)?

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What type of school does your child attend?

- Mainstream School
- Specialist Base attached to Mainstream School
- Special School
- Other

If other, please specify

---

Does your child have a formal diagnosis of Autism or Developmental Language Disorder?

- Developmental Language Disorder
- Autism
- No formal diagnosis

Does your child have any of the following Special Educational Needs or Disabilities? Please select all that apply

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
- Conduct Disorder (CD)
- Developmental Coordination Disorder (Dyspraxia)
- Down's Syndrome
- Dyslexia
- Dyscalculia
- Epilepsy
- Global Developmental Delay
- Hearing Impairment
- Physical Disability
- Sensory Processing Disorder
- Social, Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties (SEMH)
- Speech Impediment
- Visual Impairment

Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following best describes your child?

Verbal

Non-Verbal

How many older siblings does your child have?

0

1

2

3 or more

How many younger siblings does your child have?

0

1

2

3 or more

## Your child and their friends

Please rate the following statements:

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
My child is rather solitary, tends to play alone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child has at least one good friend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child is generally liked by other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child is picked on or bullied by other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child gets on better with adults than with other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you think that your child has enough friends?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Can you estimate how many friends your child has? This can be children that they play with at home, online or at school

---

Does your child have a best friend?

- Yes

No

I don't know

If yes, have you met this best friend?

Yes

No

I don't know

How often does your child start conversations about their friends?

Daily

4-6 times a week

2-3 times a week

Once a week

Never

Will your child happily talk about their friends if you begin the conversation?

Yes



No

Sometimes

Do you think that the type of school your child attends makes a difference to their friendships and why?

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In your own words, please could you explain how well you feel your child is at taking turns, and solving disagreements without the need for adult support

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In your own words, please describe how you think your child feels about their friendships

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In your own words, please describe how you feels about your child's friendships

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Please leave any further comments you wish to make about your child's friendships below

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Thank you for taking part in this research exploring how children experience friendships.  
Would you be happy for the researcher to contact you in the future about similar studies?

Yes

No

## APPENDIX G – Teacher Questionnaire



### Friendship Study - Teacher Questionnaire

#### How do Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Experience Friendships?

Dear Teacher/Teaching Assistant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project investigating how children with SENDs experience friendships. This is a short questionnaire about you, the child you work with, their school and their friendships. If you have any questions regarding completing the questionnaire, please contact the researcher on [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk)

Thank you for your help with this research.

Participant code:

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## Demographic questions:

What gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say
- Other

What is your ethnicity?

- White British
- White Non-British (White Irish, White European, White other)
- Black British
- Black / African / Caribbean
- Asian British
- Asian / Indian / Pakistani / Bangladeshi / Chinese
- Mixed / multiple ethnic groups
- Other ethnic group

What type of school do you work in?

- Mainstream Primary School
- Special School
- Specialist Base attached to Mainstream School
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been teaching in years?

\_\_\_\_\_

What, if any, training have you received with regards to working with children who have SENDs?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

## Friendships:

Please rate the following statements. Please think about the child who is involved in this study and give your answers on the basis of the child's behaviour over the last six months or this school year:

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
Rather solitary, tends to play alone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has at least one good friend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is generally liked by other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is picked on or bullied by other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gets on better with adults than with other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you think the child you work with has enough friends?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Can you estimate how many friends the child you work with has?

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Does the child have a best friend?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Have you met this best friend?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

How often does the child start conversations about their friends?

- Daily
- 4-6 times a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Once a week
- Never

Will the child you work with happily talk about their friends if you begin the conversation?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes



Do you think that the type of school a child attends makes a difference to their friendships and why?

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In your own words, please could you explain how well you feel the child you work with is at taking turns, and solving disagreements without the need for adult support

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In your own words, please describe how you think the child feels about their friendships

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In your own words, please describe how you feel about the child's friendships

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Please leave any further comments you wish to make about the child's friendships below

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Thank you for taking part in this research exploring how children experience friendships.

Would you be happy for the researcher to contact you in the future about similar studies?

Yes

No

If yes, please provide your name and contact detail below:

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## APPENDIX H – Recruitment Flyer



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*



### Are you a parent or carer of an autistic child?

- I am conducting a study looking at how children in Key Stage 2, aged 7-11 years', experience friendship
- I specifically want to hear the experiences of autistic children with a formal diagnosis who are in **full time specialist education** in the UK
- Taking part will involve your child completing a scrapbook and a brief conversation between you and your child about their friends
- You will receive **two £5 Amazon** vouchers for your time



Please contact Laura at [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk) or follow the link below if you are interested in taking part



# APPENDIX I – Parent Information and Consent



Department of Education

## How do Children with SENDs Experience Friendships?

Dear parent/guardian,

I, Laura Fox, am writing to invite you and your child to participate in a research project investigating how children with special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs) experience friendships. The research is being conducted from the Department of Education at the University of York and will form part of my PhD. Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let me know if anything is unclear or if you would like further information via email on [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk). Please also read the information about GDPR that is provided via the link: [https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr\\_information/](https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr_information/)

### What is the purpose of this study?

For some children with SENDs, making friends and socialising may be difficult. However, little is known about how children with SENDs feel about their friendships. This study aims to investigate how children with SENDs experience friendship and if those experiences differ between mainstream and specialised settings. It aims to identify:

- How children with SENDs describe their experiences of peer relationships, and their ability to make and maintain friendships, and to what extent they value friendships
- If children with SENDs in mainstream school's experience friendship differently to children taught in specialised settings
- If teachers and parents perceive children's friendships differently to each other, and to the children themselves

I hope that by gathering this information, the study may inform future interventions that promote friendships and positive wellbeing in children.

### Who can participate?

Anyone with a child aged 7-11 years who is currently attending a UK mainstream primary or special school with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Developmental Language Disorder (DLD).

## **What would participating in this study mean for you?**

You will be asked to provide a suitable postal address so that an information pack can be sent to you which will include a scrapbook, craft items, and an information sheet for your child's teacher/teaching assistant, should they wish to participate in the project.

Your child will be asked to complete a scrapbook. This will involve activities such as drawing what they think a good friend looks like and recording their favourite things to do. They only need to do as much of this as they want to. You will also be asked to use a smartphone or a tablet to video record yourself interviewing your child about how they experience friendships. To ensure that the interview is as fun as possible for your child, the questions will be closely linked to the scrapbook activities and you will be provided with an interview script to follow. The interview should take no more than 30 minutes and your child only needs to answer questions if they are happy to do so. **As we want children to only take part in activities they are comfortable with, children can opt to complete these interview questions in written form, either by themselves or you, or by audio recording if they find this more comfortable than answering the questions on video.**

It will be asked that the scrapbook is returned to the researcher afterwards, via a prepaid envelope, but any craft items that are unused may be kept by you and your child. You and your child will be given the chance to comment on the transcript of the interview within 4 weeks of the interview being carried out.

You will be asked to complete a short, online questionnaire about yourself, your child, their school and their friends. The questionnaire will automatically save, so you don't have to complete it in one go and should take no longer than 10 minutes.

At the end of the survey, you will have the option to volunteer to participate in follow up studies, looking at how your child's friendships have developed.

As a thank you for your time, you will be provided with two £5 Amazon vouchers, one for you and one for your child. The first will be issued on receipt of the video interview, and the second on receipt of the scrapbook.

## **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in this study is entirely optional. If you do agree to participate in the study, you are free to leave any questions unanswered or to stop completing the questionnaire or interview altogether at any point. If you change your mind at any point before or while submitting your data, or later, up to the moment the data is fully anonymised, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason. Please note that data will be fully anonymised within 6 months of initial data collection. If you chose to stop completing the questionnaire but do not withdraw your data, it is possible that the answers you have given will still be anonymously used in the research.

## Storing and using your data

All information will be kept completely confidential and no names will be published. Any information that identifies you will be stored separately from the data. Identifying information will be destroyed within 6 months, when time two data has been collected. Anonymous data, including drawings or written words, may be used in presentations, online, in research reports, in project summaries or similar. Your individual data will not be identifiable, but if you do not want the data to be used in this way please do not agree to take part in the study. Since we are practising Open Science, anonymised data will be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories. This means that your anonymised data may be used for future research, but there will be no way for the data to be linked back to you.

## Processing of your data

Information that you provide will be treated confidentially and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University of York is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, we process personal data for research purposes under Article 6(1) (e) of the GDPR: *Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest*. Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j): *Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes*.

## Risks and discomforts

There are no risks associated with this study, though the questionnaire will ask you about any difficulties your child may be facing with friends. If at any point whilst answering the questions you feel uncomfortable or upset, feel free to stop the questionnaire. If at any point in the interview your child becomes distressed with the task or needs to take a break, please feel free to pause the interview or stop it all together.

## Questions or concerns

This research has been approved by the Department of Education, University of York Ethics Committee. If you have any questions or complaints about this research please contact Laura Fox at [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk) or the Ethics Committee via [education-research-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:education-research-admin@york.ac.uk). If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@york.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@york.ac.uk)

If you agree with the above information, please proceed by clicking on the link below. This will provide you with further information on how to begin participation in the study.

<https://forms.gle/dRLYmwYW1tmQx5x57>

Many thanks for your help with this research.  
Laura Fox  
PhD Researcher



## APPENDIX J – Teacher Information and Consent

Department of Education



### How do Children with SENDs Experience Friendships?

Dear Teacher/Teaching Assistant,

I, Laura Fox, am writing to invite you to participate in a research project investigating how children with special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs) experience friendships. You are receiving this letter because a child in your class is currently participating in the study. The research is being conducted from the Department of Education at the University of York and will form part of my PhD. Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let me know if anything is unclear or if you would like further information via email on [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk). Please also read the information about GDPR that is provided via the link: [https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr\\_information/](https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr_information/)

#### What is the purpose of this study?

For some children with SENDs, making friends and socialising may be difficult. However, little is known about how children with SENDs feel about their friendships. This study aims to investigate how children with SENDs experience friendship and if those experiences differ between mainstream and specialised settings. It aims to identify:

- How children with SENDs describe their experiences of peer relationships, and their ability to make and maintain friendships, and to what extent they value friendships
- If children with SENDs in mainstream school's experience friendship differently to children taught in specialised settings
- If teachers and parents perceive children's friendships differently to each other, and to the children themselves

We hope that by gathering this information, the study may inform future interventions that promote friendships and positive wellbeing in children.

#### Who can participate?

Any teacher or teaching assistant that works with the child who is participating in the study (i.e. the child who has passed on this information to you).

### **What would participating in this study mean for you?**

You will be asked to complete a short, online questionnaire about the child you work with, their school and their friendships. The questionnaire will automatically save, so you don't have to complete it in one go and it should take no longer than 10 minutes. At the end of the survey, you will have the option to volunteer to participate in a short follow up study to find out how the child's peer relationships develop over the coming months. The survey has also been provided in paper copy, if this is more convenient for you.

### **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in this study is entirely optional. If you do agree to participate in the study, you are free to leave any questions unanswered or to stop completing the questionnaire altogether at any point. If you change your mind at any point before or while submitting your data, or later, up to the moment the data is fully

anonymised, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason. If you choose to stop completing the questionnaire but do not withdraw your data, it is possible that the answers you have given will still be anonymously used in the research.

### **Storing and using your data**

All information will be kept completely confidential and no names will be published. Any information that identifies you will be stored separately from the data and destroyed once analysis has been complete, and within 3 years of the data being collected. Anonymous data may be used in presentations, online, in research reports, in project summaries or similar. Your individual data will not be identifiable, but if you do not want the data to be used in this way please do not agree to take part in the study. Since we are practising Open Science, anonymised data will be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories. This means that your anonymised data may be used for future research, but there will be no way for the data to be linked back to you.

### **Processing of your data**

Information that you provide will be treated confidentially and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University of York is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, we process personal data for research purposes under Article 6(1) (e) of the GDPR: *Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest*. Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j): *Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes*

### **Risks and discomforts**

There are no risks associated with this study, though the questionnaire will ask you about any difficulties the child in your class may be facing with their friends. If at any point whilst answering the questions you feel uncomfortable or upset, feel free to stop the questionnaire.

**Questions or concerns**

This research has been approved by the Department of Education, University of York Ethics Committee. If you have any questions or complaints about this research please contact Laura Fox at [laura.fox@york.ac.uk](mailto:laura.fox@york.ac.uk) or the Ethics Committee via [education-research-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:education-research-admin@york.ac.uk)). If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@york.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@york.ac.uk)

If you agree with the above information, please proceed by visiting the link below. This will provide you with further information on how to begin participation in the study. Alternatively, you can complete the paper questionnaire included with this letter and return to the researcher via the prepaid envelope

[https://york.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_204qeWZgjlhCojc](https://york.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_204qeWZgjlhCojc)

Many thanks for your help with this research.

Laura Fox

PhD Student



## Information sheet for children

Study Title:

How do children feel about their friendships?

### **What is research?**

Research is a way of finding out answers to questions when we don't know enough about.



### **What is friendship?**

Friendship is when you and another person get on and like to play or hang out with each other. This might be someone from your class, someone from where you live or a someone that you know through clubs or gaming.

### **Why are we doing this research?**

We know that not everyone has a lot of friends and we also know that not everyone likes to have a lot of friends. We would like to learn more about this by asking how you feel about friendships.

## Why me?

We are inviting you to take part because you have either Autism or Developmental Language Disorder, and we really care about hearing what children with Autism and Developmental Language Disorder think about these questions.



## Do I have to take part?

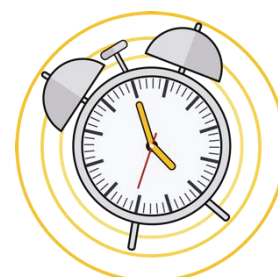
No! You don't have to take part if you don't want to. Please read this sheet and talk to an adult at home if you want to before you decide. If you don't want to take part, just say no. If you only want to take part in some bits, that's ok too. You can skip questions.

## What will happen if I take part?

1. We would like you to fill in the scrapbook with the pens and craft items sent to you by the researcher. You can fill it in however you want to and if you get stuck you can ask an adult for help. If there are questions you don't like, you can skip them or do them later
2. We would like you to talk about your answers with an adult at home, and for your conversation to be videoed. We would like you to do this because it will give us a chance to observe you talking about friendship with someone that you trust, and will help us to really understand what you think about this topic.

## How long will it take?

The scrapbook can take as long as you need, but the chat with whoever is at home should take no longer than 30 minutes.



**What's good about taking part?**

Taking part will really help us learn more about how you feel about your friendships. This will help us come up with ways to help children in the future who might want to have more friends or might not want to have any friends!

**Will anyone know what I've said?**

We won't tell anyone what you've said, and if we talk about anything that you have said, we will never use your name, so no one will know it's you!

**Will anyone else know I'm doing the research?**

The people in our research team will know you're taking part. Your teacher will know that you are taking part because we would like to ask them some questions, but they won't know anything about what you have said or done in your scrapbook.

**What if I don't want to do the research anymore?**

Just tell your mum, dad or carer at any time. Even if you've started filling in your scrapbook or chatting about your answers, you can still stop any time.

**What happens to what the researchers find out?**

We will write up what you say in a report that other researchers read. We will also write a summary of the results for you to read if you would like. Just ask an adult at home to let us know.

# APPENDIX L – DMP Study 2

A comparison of how children with SENDs experience friendships in mainstream and specialised settings

## 1. Defining your data

### 1a. What data will you produce?

- The study will produce online questionnaire data from both parents and teachers.
- Video data of interviews will be obtained, then transcribed into text.
- Scrapbooks will produce data in the form of drawings.

### 1b. What formats and what software will you use?

- Video recordings will be saved in the format that they are received from participants; transcripts will be created in and saved as word documents.
- NVivo may be used for coding transcripts.

### 1c. How much data do you expect to generate?

- It is expected that 24 interviews of around 30 minutes in duration will be gathered at time point one. Around 24GB of video data.
- It is hoped that a further 24 interviews of around 15 minutes in duration will be gathered at time point two. Around 12GB of video data.
- It is expected that each participant will complete a scrapbook which will be returned to the researcher before analysis begins.
- It is expected that 24 teacher questionnaires and 24 parent questionnaires will be collected at time point one.
- It is hoped that 24 teacher questionnaires and 24 parent questionnaires will be collected at time point two.

**1d. Who owns the data you will generate?**

- I will own all data created

2. Looking after your data

**2a. Where will you store your data?**

- I will store my data on a password protected hard drive that only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to.
- Backups of my data will be stored on the University's centrally managed network, in my personal filestore (the M: drive).
- My participants' scrapbooks will be stored in a locked cabinet in an office at home.

**2b. How will you back-up your data?**

- Backups of my data will be stored on the University's centrally managed filestore. The filestore is regularly and automatically backed up by IT Services.
- Photographs of the scrapbook contents will be taken and stored on both the password protected hard drive and the University's filestore.

**2c. Who else has a right to see or use this data during the project?**

- Only my supervisor should have access to my data during the project.
- Others in my research group may need to see some of my data but this will be anonymised.

**2d. How will you structure and name your folders?**

- Data and documentation files will be held in separate folders.



For example:

- Study one > participant info
- Study one > interviews > interview transcripts
- Study one > interviews > scrapbook photographs
- Study two > interviews > interview transcripts

### **2e. How will you name your files?**

Participants files will be names according to participant code, type of data, and date, for example Participant123\_interview1\_24112020

### **2f. How will you manage different versions of your files?**

There is only ever one version of each data file.

### **2g. What additional information will be required to understand your data?**

I will keep additional notes about interviews in a research diary.

## **3. Archiving your data**

### **3a. What data should be kept or destroyed after the end of your project?**

- Any information that identifies participants will be destroyed within 6 months, when time two data has been collected.
- Anonymised data will be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories.

### **3b. For how long should data be kept after the end of your project?**

- Anonymised data will be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories.

### **3c. Where will the data you keep be archived at the end of the project?**

Anonymised data will be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories.

### **3d. When will you archive your data?**

- I will provide a copy of the data supporting my thesis to the University for long-term retention when I submit my thesis.
- Data will be archived upon final thesis corrections.

## **4. Sharing your data at the end of your project**

### **4a. What data should or shouldn't be shared openly and why?**

- Some of my data identifies individual patients and must be anonymised before sharing.
- Video observations will not be shared as they would allow participants to be identified.
- Respondents to my survey will be informed that their responses will be anonymised and archived for data sharing with the UK Data Service. Explicit consent for this will be collected.

### **4b. Who should have access to the final dataset(s) and under what conditions?**

Myself and my supervisor.

#### **4c. How will you share your final dataset(s)?**

- A copy of the data supporting my thesis/publication will be retained by the University's [Research Data York](#) service, and users will be able to download my data from the [York Research Database](#), the University's research portal.

#### **5. Implementing your plan**

##### **5a. Who is responsible for making sure this plan is followed?**

I will take responsibility for carrying out the actions required by this plan and report them to my supervisor as appropriate.

##### **5b. How often will this plan be reviewed and updated?**

My supervisor and I will review this plan every 6 months and will agree updates if necessary.

##### **5c. What actions have you identified from the rest of this plan?**

- Set up a back-up system and periodically test that I can restore from my backup.
- Learn how to anonymise my data so that it can be shared.
- Ensure that I request informed consent from my participants for archiving and sharing their data.
- Identify a suitable repository to deposit my data with after the end of my project and contact the repository to find if and how to deposit my data with them.

##### **5d. What policies are relevant to your project?**

- This project is covered by the University of York Research Data Management Policy.

**5e. What further information do you need to carry out these actions?**

I need to identify a suitable repository to deposit my data with after the end of my project and contact the repository to find if and how to deposit my data with them.

# APPENDIX M – Transitions Consent Form

Principal logo



## Department of Education

Social and Emotional Difficulties in Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities during the Coronavirus Pandemic: The Role of School Transition

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The project is led by Dr Umar Toseeb, who is a Senior Lecturer at the University of York. You have been selected because your child has a diagnosis of autism and has transitioned between schools this year. Before continuing, please read this information carefully.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

Children with SENDs are more likely to experience social and emotional difficulties compared to their unaffected peers. The current outbreak of the Coronavirus presents a particularly challenging situation for children with SENDs. School closures, self-isolation, and the potential for a prolonged period of uncertainty may be challenging for families and children with SENDs, who have a unique profile of strengths and difficulties. The aims of this part of the research project are to understand how the transition between schools during COVID-19 affected children with SENDs and their families.

### **What would this mean for you?**

You are being asked to take part in an online interview, which should last between 40-45 minutes. We want to have a conversation with you about yours and your child's experiences of transition between schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no right or wrong answer. Please answer as honestly as possible.

You will be asked to provide your name and email address. But the data that you provide will be stored by code number. Any information that identifies you will be stored separately from the data you provide and destroyed once the data collection finishes. We expect that this will be no later than 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020. If we need to keep identifiable data past this date, we will email you on the email address that you provide giving you an opportunity to withdraw consent for continued storage of identifiable data.

### **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in this study is entirely optional. If you do agree to take part in the online interview you are free to not answer any question or to stop taking part in the interview altogether at any point. If you change your mind at any point after the interview, you will be able to withdraw your participation up to two weeks after participation without having to provide a reason, by emailing the email address provided at the end of this form. After two weeks, the data will be anonymised so we will not be able to withdraw it. We may publish findings as the study progresses so you will not be able to withdraw data already included in a publication but you will be able to withdraw consent for future use of the data up until the point of anonymisation.

### **Storing and using your data**

The interview will be audio recorded and stored in a password protected file and will only be accessible to the researchers involved in the project. The anonymised transcript is available upon request within the first two weeks after you take part in the interview. An anonymised transcript of the data may be used in presentations, online, in research reports, in project summaries or similar. Your individual data will not be identifiable but if you do not want the data to be used in this way please do not take part in the interview..

Since we are practising Open Science, anonymised transcript of the data will be stored indefinitely with the University's Research Data York service or in other open research data repositories.

### **Processing of your data**

Information that you provide will be treated confidentially and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University of York is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. We process personal data for research purposes under Article 6(1) (e) of the GDPR. Full details are available at [https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr\\_information/](https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr_information/)

### **Questions or concerns**

This research has been approved by the Department of Education Ethics Committee. If you have any questions or complaints about this research please contact Dr Umar Toseeb via [umar.toseeb@york.ac.uk](mailto:umar.toseeb@york.ac.uk), or the Ethics Committee via [education-research-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:education-research-admin@york.ac.uk). If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@york.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@york.ac.uk). Many thanks for your help with this research.

Dr Umar Toseeb

Please enter your name and email address below and return this form by email to [educ621@york.ac.uk](mailto:educ621@york.ac.uk).

FULL NAME:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

## APPENDIX N – Transition Interview Schedule

### School transitions during COVID-19

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in our study. We are interviewing parents to find out how their child's experience of moving to a new school or college has been affected by COVID19. The interview should last no more than 45 minutes and you are free to withdraw at any time. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Please can you tell me a bit about how things are going for your child [NAME] in their new school at the moment?
  1. *What do they like or dislike about it?*
  2. *How well would you say they have settled in?*
  3. *What are the new arrangements for school drop-off and pick up (e.g. school transport if they use it) and how is that working out?*
  
2. How do you think your child [NAME] feels about their new school compared to their old school?
  1. *When did they last see their old teachers and how did coronavirus and lockdown affect their relationships with their teachers?*
  2. *Are they missing any particular teachers or Teaching Assistants?*
  3. *How have they coped with the change in routine and the change in environment?*
  4. *How are they coping with the learning in their new school?*
  5. *Has this move to a new school altered your child's behaviour in any way? Please can you tell me a little more about that.*
  
3. How have your child's [NAME] friendships been affected by coronavirus and by the move to a new school?
  1. Can you tell me a bit about your child's [NAME] friendships at their new school?
  2. *Who are their friends?*
  3. *What do they tell you about their friends?*
  4. *What do they say about the other children in their class*
  5. *Does your child [NAME] still have contact with their old friends, and how do you think they feel about this? How can you tell (e.g. from what they say or from what they do)?*
  
4. Please describe the support that you and your child [NAME] received to prepare for the transition?
  1. *What do you think about the quality of the support your family received?*
  2. *Did the support come more from the old school or from the new school? Please can you tell me a little more about that?*

3. *What role did your child's teacher or TA from their previous school play in supporting their transition?*
4. *How do you think the support you were offered was affected by the COVID pandemic?*
5. *What additional support would have been helpful to you or your child in making their transition smooth?*

5. In what ways do you think coronavirus has affected your child's experience of moving to, and settling into, a new school? Please explain your answer.

1. *How has their learning been affected by being in lockdown before the move?*
2. *How has their behaviour been affected by being in lockdown before the move?*
3. *How have their relationships been affected by being in lockdown before the move?*
4. *Has your child been asked to self-isolate since starting their new school? If so, what has been the effect of that on them?*

6. How has home-school communication been?

1. *Have you had a parents evening yet? How did your child's teacher say they were settling in?*
2. *What kind of communication have you had from your child's teacher and/or school (other than a parent's evening)?*
3. *How helpful has the SENDCo at the new school been?*
4. *To what extent does the new school value your input as a parent?*
5. *How does home-school communication compare to their old school?*

7. Thinking about the days before your child [NAME] started their new school, can you describe their behaviour and any thoughts they shared with you about the move.

8. Thinking about their very first day at their new school – please can you describe what happened before and after school?

9. Thinking about the return to school, after half term, please can you describe how your child [NAME] felt about going back, and how that compared to their first day in September?

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your child's [NAME] experience of moving school during the coronavirus pandemic?

Thank you so much for your time and for your thoughtful answers. They will really help us to build our understanding of school transition for children with Special Educational Needs, especially during a pandemic. If you would like to see a transcript of this interview please email me on the address used to set up this interview within two weeks.

That's all of my questions. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we finish?



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