

# Specific Features of Understanding of the Idea of Friendship by Children with Disabilities

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## Abstract

For a long time in Russia, the number of children with disabilities has been increasing. The study of the mental state of this polymorphic group of children for many decades retains its theoretical and practical significance for educational psychology for special needs students (special psychology). Full socialization of children with disabilities is impossible without the formation of a system of their interpersonal relationships with peers. Friendship as a process of relationships is not only the basis for the moral and personal development of the child, but also performs important functions in his/her life. The purpose of the study is to examine the specific features of understanding of the idea of friendship of children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation. For the first time, a comprehensive psychological study of the phenomenology of ideas about friendship has been carried out the specifics of ideas about friendship and friends of children with disabilities have been described.

**Keywords:** Communication • Intellectual disabilities • Mental retardation • Socialization

## Introduction

For a long period in Russia, the number of children with disabilities has been increasing. About 4.5% of the children's population (more than 1.5 million children) needs special education according to the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the number of school children with persistent learning difficulties has remained unchanged (consistently over 40%); about 20% of children have intellectual disabilities, and 20% of school children have speech disorders [1].

In scientific studies of recent years, there has occurred a shift in priorities in the study of children with disabilities from the cognitive direction to the personal, social and emotional [2-4]. Friendship is socially important for children and teenagers [3-6]. Currently, friendship is not determined as a process of information exchange, but as the satisfaction of an internal need for interaction, such as: mutual open-mindedness, common interests, trust, affection, sympathy, stability of relations [7-9] presence of emotional intimacy [10], attention, selectivity, common interests, trust [7,11]. The study of friendship and close relationships of children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation is popular among both Russian and foreign scientists [3,12-15].

Friendship as a special area of interpersonal relations is not only of subjective value for the person, but also has an objective value for the development of personality. Having friends and harmonious relationships is one of the significant prerequisites for psychological comfort and satisfaction with life. An inharmonious friendship or absence thereof is a factor of problems with mental health, socialization and personal development [16,17]. The definitions of the concept of friendship emphasize that stability and duration of relations are the necessary components of friendship; meanwhile a low degree of selectivity is possible [18-20]. Friendship is a freely established mutual relationship characterized by emotional intensity, emotional and instrumental support, intimacy, and personal attitude toward a partner [21]. It is characterized by mutual linkage, a high degree of self-disclosure, depth of emotional experience, closeness, trust and support [7,11]. For children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation,

loneliness, difficulty in finding a friend and maintaining friendship are typical [16,18]. Instability, low differentiation, lack of interest in joint play and learning activities are typical for interpersonal relations of children with mental retardation [19,20]. The leader in the class is revealed both by positive signs and negative characteristics. There are children in the class of the studied group who have absolutely no interaction or contact with the other children [21,22]. Slow development of forms of communication with adults is typical for children with mild mental retardation. The number and frequency of contacts with important people are unpredictable in nature, due to the insufficient formation of verbal communication, the lack of communication skills necessary for social development, inadequate reactions, and inability to deeply understand the nature of relationships with others [3,16,23]. It is difficult for this group of children to understand the interests of the partner in communication; focusing on the external qualities of classmates, their behavioral reactions, and not the intellectual or moral characteristics is observed in the process of choosing a partner [23,24]. Communication in small endogenous groups with older children or younger children is more comfortable.

The specific features of friendship of children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation lie in the difficulties of understanding friendship, unrealistic ideas about it, limited social circle, reduced need for communication, lack of interest in a peer's personality, difficulties in establishing trusting and long-lasting relationships, inadequate emotional states (negative orientation). The phenomenology of specific features of friendship is an actual subject of research, however, it remains little studied in the field of clinical and correctional psychology.

## Materials and Methods

The study involved 97 children from educational institutions. The control group consisted of 31 children with a normative level of intellectual development. The first experimental group consisted of 3rd grade pupils with developmental delay (F83 (mixed specific disorders of psychological development according to ICD-10) (average age is 9.9 years). The second experimental group consisted of children of the 4th grade diagnosed with

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F70 (mild mental retardation, according to ICD-10). The average age of the children was 10 years. In addition to the diagnosis of mild mental retardation, the children had: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, speech developmental delay, and general and systemic speech disorders.

In the selection of methods and techniques, the importance of obtaining qualitative and quantitative indicators was taken into account, which will most fully reveal the ideas about friendship that children with developmental and mild mental retardation have. Thus, in accordance with the objectives of the study, the authors selected the following groups of methods: Clinical and psychological method (conversation), experimental psychological method (psych diagnostic method (sociometry), the method of interview (the study of attitudes towards close people D. Chiketti and M. Lynch (adaptation by T.V. Arkhireeva, a survey entitled "Perceptions about friendship" by E.V. Yurkova, the associative method ("The sentence completion test" (M. Sacks and S. Levy), projective methods (drawing on the topic "My Friend"; an essay on the topic "My Friend"). Empirical research was undertaken both in individual and group forms. During the work with children with disabilities, the number of people in the group did not exceed five.

The IBM SPSS 23 statistical package was used for mathematical and statistical data processing and testing the hypotheses posed in the course of the study. It was designed specifically to identify the reliability of the results and the connection between the indicators of empirical research. In addition, the following methods of statistical processing were used in the study: Factor analysis, analysis of variance (2-Way ANOVA).

## Results

In accordance with the purpose of the study, the procedure of factor analysis using the method of principal components using varimax rotation was applied in order to study the age characteristics of ideas about friendship of children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation. This method was applied to reduce the dimension of the source data with the purpose of their description and selection of the main components [25]. Thus, thirteen variables out of five methods for studying ideas about the concepts of friendship and friend were combined into five factors. Figure 1 shows the graphical structure of the studied factors and their load. In order to take into account in the interpretation the significant values of factor loads, their absolute values have been limited (more than 0.5).

As it is indicated in Figure 1, Factor 1 (with informative load of 14.08%) includes three variables, according to which it is possible to name "ideas about friendship." It reflects the roles and personal qualities of a friend and the social characteristics (support from a friend, common interests, understanding, and the need for communication). This factor describes ideas about the motives of friendship (common interests and values, sympathy, emotional closeness, mutual trust), the meaning of friendship, which includes an understanding companion who provides support and help, which gives a sense of self-confidence and enhances social activity.

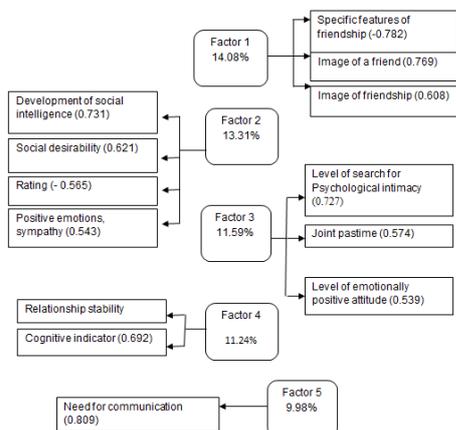


Figure 1. Factor structure of the results of psychological study of the friendship phenomenon.

Factor 2 (informative load of 13.31%) contains variables that describe the motives for choosing a friend and can be called "the motives of friendship." Analysis of the variables included in this factor shows that the motives for a child to choose a friend are related to his/her social interaction faculty, positive status in the field of social relations, the presence of mutual sympathy and positive emotions during communication.

Factor 3 (informative load of 11.59%) was called "emotional intimacy." In it, the "level of search for psychological intimacy" (0.727) has a great weight. This indicates that the child has a desire for close relations with peers, namely wants his or her friend to be an understanding partner, and to pay attention and spend time with him/her. In addition, in the process of friendship, a child has a need for the implementation of common interests, activities and hobbies. Thus, friendship and friend are mostly characterized by positive emotions.

The next factor is Factor 4, (with informative load of 11.24%). The factor under study describes that the stability (mutuality) of friendship can be determined by the child's social intelligence. This factor takes into account the child's ability to correctly perceive the emotional states of other people, predict their behavior in different situations, assess the mutuality of communication, the partner's need for communication and thus characterize relationships as stable. This factor is called the "understanding of friendship."

Factor 5 (informative load of 9.98%) can be called "communicative need for friendship". In modern studies of children's friendship, one of its most important characteristics is the need or desire for communication increasing from primary school age to the adolescent period. It is in the process of interpersonal interaction and friendship that a child acquires personal and social skills, learns to understand him (her)self, empathize and sympathize with another person. In connection with this statement, friendship is considered as the satisfaction of an internal need for interaction.

Based on the analysis of scientific literature, experimental research on the issue under study, as well as the factors obtained as a result of the authors' empirical work, friendship is presented as a three-component structure consisting of the cognitive (ideas about friendship (Factor 1), understanding of friendship (Factor 4)), emotional-need (the motives of friendship (Factor 2), emotional intimacy (Factor 3), and communicative (communicative need for the friendship (Factor 5) phenomenological concepts.

The study of the cognitive components of understanding the idea of friendship by children with disabilities.

At junior school age, both normatively developing children and in children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation have no differences in the "ideas about friendship" factor ( $F=0.650$   $p=0.524$ ). Children note that the common interests, attitudes, mutual sympathy and intimacy are the cause for the emergence of friendship. Children note the maximum degree of trusting relationship, the readiness to the "do much for the sake of friendship," the similarities in the mood and activities. The desire to have a friend is explained with the desire to have an understanding companion, a desire not to feel lonely (to have somebody "who is near me"). In the "understanding of friendship" factor, statistically significant differences were revealed ( $F=7.336$   $p=0.001$ ). It was found that children with mild mental retardation compared to normatively developing peers are characterized with unstable relations with a friend, which may be associated with such features as psychological closeness between friends, level of trust, positive emotions from interaction with a friend, satisfaction with friendship. Thus, the children's relations with developmental delay and mild mental retardation are characterized by narrow interpersonal relationships, lack of need for communication, reduced ability to recognize the nature of relationships with other people, lack of interest in their peers; breach of the personal boundaries and roles of communication, complexity in the differentiation of business and personal relationships. Most often, it is the relationship between two children, with no mutual elections between boys and girls. A characteristic feature of friendship is that its basis may be a commonness

of external life circumstances and interests (“we are desk mates”, “we live in the same house”, “we go to football matches together”).

The cognitive component includes the verbal continuum used by children to describe the image of a friend, as well as an understanding of the very concept of friendship. Studying the content of the friendship concept, children more often indicated such characteristics as joint pastime, support and trust, communication (“Friendship is support and trust”, “Friendship is a miracle”, etc.). The more frequent definition of friendship as support and trust is typical for normatively developing children and children with mild mental retardation when compared to the children with developmental delay ( $\chi^2=10.138$   $p=0.001$ ;  $\chi^2=7.499$   $p=0.006$ ). Children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation describe friendship like “help, play”, “when they help, do not leave in trouble”, “help, not leave friends, share,” “spend time together,” etc. The results of the study have shown that children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation describe friendship in terms of its functionality. Less frequently they mention the joint pastime ( $\chi^2=10.599$   $p=0.001$ ) and describe friendship as a process of communication ( $\chi^2=19.142$   $p=0.000$ ). Analysis of the results obtained during the application of projective methods revealed general trends for children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation in comparison to normatively developing peers: children rarely indicate a friend's sense of humor (“It's fun to be with him”, “My friend is cheerful”), his/her intelligence, intimacy, but more often mention a friend's negativism, his/her closed-character, inclination to pay attention to him/herself and experiencing his or her own feelings and emotions (introversion) [25,26]. Consequently, the image of a friend for children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation is characterized by passivity in communication, secrecy, isolation, a friend's tendency to pay attention to his/her own emotions.

The study of the emotional-needs component of friendship of children with disabilities.

In the course of studying the emotional-need component of friendship in childhood, statistically significant differences have been found between groups of children with a normative level of intellectual development and children with disabilities, which are presented in Table 1.

The leading motives for choosing a friend for children with developmental delay, as well as for normatively developing peers, are emotional attachment and sympathy ( $F=29.22$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The motives also include social desirability. This feature is characteristic of children with developmental delay and consists in a greater desire to please the others ( $F=10.99$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) [25]. When studying emotional intimacy in friendship among children, differences in the nature of emotional relationships and the need

for psychological intimacy with a friend should be noted. Thus, for children with a normative level of intellectual development and developmental delay, the attitude towards a friend is accompanied by positive emotions towards him, while children with developmental delay tend to decrease or have a lack of need for psychological intimacy with a friend. For children with mild mental retardation, an unstable type of emotional relationship to a friend is typical, for example, about 50% of children report a negative attitude towards a friend. At the same time, the majority of children in this group show an unsatisfied need for psychological intimacy with a friend. Many of the surveyed children say that the predominant and defining characteristic of friendship is a positive emotional background (“Friendship is cool”, “Friendship is fun”).

Analyzing ideas about friendship of children with mental retardation, in most cases, an emotional-positive reaction is highlighted (“Friendship is not work”, “happy life”, “beautiful”, “friendship is a miracle”, “this is a miracle, joy, happiness, it's cool” , “fun”, “miracle, cool, good”), but there is no description of its leading substantive characteristics, such as trust, mutual help, understanding, etc. Thus, ideas about friendship are described by children as an emotional-positive process, but significant characteristics are not detected. For children with mild mental retardation, friendship is associated with a description of joint pastime or specific actions (“helping, playing”, “hanging out with him”, “spending time together”, “helping, not leaving friends, sharing”, “when they don't leave in trouble, help”). In some responses, the emotional component is noted (“this is good”, “happiness, loyalty”, “this is power”, “strength, good”).

The features of the emotional-need component of friendship in children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation lie in ambivalence, which consists in reducing or absence of the need for psychological closeness with a friend and a high communicative need for it. Choosing a friend, his/her position in the class (sociometric status), social desirability (positive assessment by peers and teachers), as well as the possibility of establishing friendly relations built on emotionally determined mutuality of interests is important. The process of friendship is perceived as a way to increase emotivity, since its positive emotional background is the defining characteristic.

The study of the communicative component of friendship of children with disabilities.

In the course of work, the authors established that the results obtained in children, depending on the diagnosis, differ statistically significantly in the level of communicative need for friendship ( $\chi^2=21.086$  with  $p=0.000$ ). The average ranks of the communicative need for friendship in childhood are

| Factor                      | Group of children                               |                         |                             |      | Credibility of difference |      |       |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------|---------------------------|------|-------|
|                             | Normative level of intellectual development (A) | Developmental delay (B) | Mild mental retardation (C) |      |                           |      |       |
| M                           |   |                         |                             |      |                           |      |       |
| «The motives of friendship» | 0.08  | 0.91                    | 0.48                        | 0.86 | -0.47                     | 1.10 | B-C** |
| «Emotional intimacy»        | 0.32  | 1.02                    | 0.21                        | 1.06 | -0.45                     | 0.93 | A-C*  |

**Symbols:** M: Average value,  $\delta$ : Standard deviation, \*- $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*- $p<0.001$

**Table 1.** The results of paired comparisons of the average values of the factors “the motives of friendship” and emotional intimacy” in childhood (Scheffe test).

shown in the Table 2.

| Factor                            | Groups of children              | Number | Average rank |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------|--------------|
| Communicative need for friendship | Normative level of intellectual | 31     | 31.77        |
|                                   | Development                     |        |              |
|                                   | -0.47                           |        |              |
|                                   | Developmental delay             | 30     | 64.70        |
|                                   | Mild mental retardation         | 36     | 50.75        |

**Table 2.** Average ranks of the communicative need for friendship among children.

There is a high communicative need for a friend for children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation, but lack of ability to communicate with other people and insufficient experience in mastering the necessary communication skills determines the optimal position in communicating with others. It is typical for children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation to have a largely negative perception of a friend's image, a reduced emotional background in the interaction with him/her, and an unsatisfied need for intimacy. Such groups of children reveal such characteristics of a friend as "violation (problems) of communication" more often than the normatively developing peers ( $\chi^2=13.778$   $p=0.000$ ). This feature is due to mental instability, mild excitability, and underdevelopment of mechanisms for the regulation of behavior, conflict, or, at the same time, isolation and stiffness of children with developmental delay. The described features can disrupt the ways of interacting with other children; induce conflicts, shallow contacts, and inability to build positive relationships with peers. In conflict situations, children choose the option of rivalry in the peer group, which indicates that the skills of interaction and cooperation are underdeveloped, and the communicative skills are poorly developed. These features determine the nature of interaction with a friend, and the characteristics of the friend.

## Discussion

Nowadays, we are witnessing a constant increase in the number of children with disabilities. A large group of them are schoolchildren with developmental delay and mild mental retardation, having persistent learning difficulties at different stages of studying. In case of lower intellectual development, schoolchildren need special educational environment. At the initial stage of studying children with health disabilities, particular importance was attributed to a search for opportunities to determine the level of intelligence development. That was why the cognitive direction of research prevailed. At the modern stage of development of educational psychology for special needs students (special psychology), there is a goal to study the mental state of children and to find the optimal conditions for them to integrate in the society. For complete socialization of a child with health disabilities, it is important to develop the system of interpersonal relations with both adults and peers. Friendship has a special role in relationships with people; it is considered as a special phenomenon of close contact with people, based on openness, trust and common interests. Friendship has different value for development in childhood and adolescence, and serves a basis for ethical and personal development of a child.

In the course of the research, it has been revealed that the phenomenology of the understanding of friendship by children and teenagers with health disabilities can be summarized as some structural construct, including cognitive, emotional need and communicative components. For the children of the studied groups the following friendship features are typical: Functionality in the perception of friend's role, difficulties in understanding of close and trustful relations, difficulties in establishing positive emotional contacts with peers. Meanwhile, the understanding of emotional importance of relations is impeded; the need for psychological proximity with peers is decreased. Children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation have a decrease in the cognitive component of friendship understanding,

which is manifested in the intellectual level. It is typical for children to have speech stereotypes, a functional understanding of the role of a friend and to prefer emotiveness in relationships. The research has shown that all structural components of friendship understanding by children with disabilities have their own special features and need for correction.

## Conclusion

The phenomenology of friendship understanding by children with disabilities is presented as polymorphic structure that includes cognitive, emotional-need and communicative components. In the course of analysis of the cognitive component, it has been revealed that children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation have difficulties in distinguishing concepts «friend» and «fellow», they don't differentiate the specific features of manifestation of closeness and support. In the emotional-need component, the friendship of children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation is described as positive emotional link with the functional features in the context of joint pastime as a way to increase the emotiveness. A high communicative need for a friend, his/her functional importance, the worries about dissatisfaction or disappointment in communication are the specific features of understanding of friendship in the structure of communicative component by the children with developmental delay and mild mental retardation. The understanding of friendship by children with developmental delay is connected with positive emotional background of relationships, while singling out the leading and meaningful characteristics is complicated. Certain ambivalence is typical for this group of children, as well as the tendency to decreasing need or absence of need for psychological closeness with a friend, on the one hand, and high communicative need for friendship, on the other hand. Children with mild mental retardation as compared to normatively developing peers, have unstable relationships with a friend, decreased activity in the interaction, insufficient regulation in the interpersonal relationships, and dissatisfaction with friendship. Understanding of friendship by children with mild mental retardation is described with stereotypical speech acts and stereotypical fantasies. Having joint pastime is considered to be the dominant feature of friendship.

## Limitations

Despite the relevance of the study of ideas about psychological phenomena, in particular friendship, in educational psychology for special needs students (special psychology), the real behavior of children with disabilities is of particular importance. The present study is devoted to the concept of friendship. The authors have come to a conclusion that to study friendship itself and correlate with the existing ideas, it would be productive to involve parents and teachers.

## Author Contributions

A. Lapteva—writing a literature review, experimental design research, researching, interpretation of empirical results. O. Zashchirinskaia—experimental design research, participating in a general discussion of empirical results.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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