

Submission
No 8

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Gig Buddies
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I write as the CEO of Gig Buddies Sydney; a befriending project matching a person over 18 who has a learning disability & or autism with a volunteer based on their interests & passion for music, the arts, sport or simply making a friendship outside the family or a person who is paid to be in their lives

Our project was begun in Brighton, UK 12 years ago by a social worker who saw firsthand the isolation of people he worked with Gig Buddies now operates in the UK, Ireland, Australia & New Zealand

Perhaps more than many other people in our community adults with disability experience loneliness & social isolation to a high degree

There is a great deal of academic literature exploring the cause & impact of social isolation but few practical & achievable ways to counter same

Our project has experienced a number of participants, particularly younger males on the spectrum who have had the benefits of early diagnosis, intervention & mainstream education only to be excluded from social interaction post school

The concept of post school options appears to be a narrow path with many experiencing community integration being elusive beyond family & paid support

We are frequently told by families that their adult children do not want to go to see live music with parents, what they crave is a friend who shares the same passion & who genuinely values their connection

The rites of passage many of us have experienced going from school to university, travel & a career are rarely the story of our Gig Buddy participants who have not been able to learn the social skills through those experiences necessary to build sustainable & meaningful friendships

The irony of multiple social media enabling connection is not lost on us with many of our participants having hundreds of Facebook 'friends' but no true meaningful relationships beyond family

The historical medical model of disability has not assisted in any way, after 10 years of NDIS we are still only seeing small pockets of inclusion

Historically people with disability have been kept within their own communities, being a designated workplace, accommodation setting & social events

This does not encourage or promote social inclusion but rather exclusion from opportunities to develop friendships outside the disability space

This model has been couched in terms of 'safety' but one has to ask who is being kept safe from whom

Our Buddies & their volunteers go to mainstream venues of their mutual choosing, the benefits of social & community integration can be evidenced by the longevity of many of the pairings & the strong & meaningful social circles many have developed.