Meaningful relationships are important in the lives of adults with ID/DD. Unfortunately, there are high rates of interpersonal violence in these relationships. Persons with disabilities experience rates of victimization 1.5 to 10 times greater than people without disabilities (Rand & Harrell, 2007; Petersila, 2001; Sobsey & Doe, 1991; Sobsey, Lucardie, & Mansell, 1995). Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) experience higher rates of violence and victimization than persons with any other type of disability (Rand & Harrell, 2007). Further, individuals with ID/DD tend to have small social networks, limited opportunities for social participation, and remain socially isolated (Emerson & McVilly, 2004; Ward et al., 2010).

Individuals with ID/DD face similar risk factors of interpersonal violence and offending behavior such as witnessing domestic violence, low academic achievement, and social isolation (CDC, 2010; Lindsay, 2002). Further, they lack specific socio-sexual knowledge and skills such as seeking consent, good and bad touch, mutuality, susceptibility to the influence of others, and social dimensions of gender (Cambridge & Mellan, 2000; Lindsay 2002). Socio-sexual knowledge and attitudes affect socialization of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their ability to form meaningful relationships with people of both genders (Galea, Butler, Iacono, 2004). Evidence-based interventions regarding the prevention of interpersonal violence and/or the development of healthy relationships for people with ID/DD are limited.

The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Center for Human Development (CHD) developed the Friendships & Dating Program (FDP) as a primary prevention program to teach social skills necessary to develop healthy, meaningful relationships and to prevent violence in relationships for adults with ID/DD. Community agency personnel facilitate the FDP to co-ed groups of adults with ID/DD in agency and community settings. The FDP is a 10-week program comprised of 20 sessions. Sessions focus on skill building using the group process and experiential learning in community settings. Session topics include: feelings and emotions, types of relationships, potential dates, boyfriend/girlfriend, boundaries, public vs. private displays of affection, assertiveness, first impressions, communication, non-verbal social cues, planning an activity or date, dating rights, personal safety, sexual health, gender differences, breaking up, and conflict resolution. The FDP incorporates innovative approaches that combine: 1) preventing and/or decreasing interpersonal violence; 2) increasing social networks; and 3) increasing social activities.

The FDP has been piloted with 126 adults with ID/DD in Alaska. Qualitative feedback from participants report FDP strategies resulted in improved social relationships. Quantitative data was analyzed utilizing a piecewise linear mixed model approach. The results showed an average of 2.3 incidents of interpersonal violence at baseline, which was significantly decreased by a mean of 1.4 (p = .024) at the end of the intervention. Further, the data showed an average social network size of 4.8 at baseline, which was significantly increased by a mean of 2.5 (p = .005) at the end of the intervention.
We present background research, program findings, and clinical application of the FDP to prevent interpersonal violence and promote the development of healthy relationships for individuals with ID/DD.