

SUPPORT CIRCLES

Circles of Friends or Circles of Support originated in Canada over twenty years ago. Circles involve a small number of people coming together regularly to provide support to a person with a disability and their family in their decision making and planning for the future. Families have concerns about the security of their family member and especially when they are no longer able to be there to support them. Pave the Way has a strong belief that it is people who keep people safe. It is our relationships with people that give us security and that provide the richness and quality of life.

Building support circles and networks around people with disabilities and their families is one significant strategy in securing and safeguarding the future of family members. We believe that planning for the future is essential as is living and acting today in order to build "good lives".

Support Circles have a number of roles including:

- Assistance with planning processes
- Assistance with decision making
- Bringing energy, commitment and imagination into the lives of people with disabilities and their families
- Providing a forum to discuss options and developing strategies
- Encouraging people to dream
- Listening and ensuring the person's voice is heard
- Acting as advocates to ensure the person is treated well and has appropriate support
- Assisting the person to manage support staff and support funds

Subsequently, as relationships build, often people provide practical support as well as companionship, deeper relationships, fun and celebration. Circles also provide a place of mutual support to each other in their support of the person and their family.

Benefits of Establishing Support Circles - our findings so far:

- Families have capacity and initiative that has provided substantial safeguards to their sons/daughters.
- Inviting others to share the journey strengthens that capacity.
- Isolation and the person's reliance only on family is reduced.
- People with disabilities and their families have deepened relationships with other chosen people.
- People who care sometimes need an invitation to be more involved when asked they almost always say "Yes!"
- Families have amazing commitment to their family members.
- People are clearer about the future and their visions of a good life.
- Plans provide a framework for action and clarify the steps that are needed.

Every circle is different – because of the uniqueness of the dreams of the individual at the centre of the circle – and the uniqueness of the contribution of each circle member.

What is working:

- Being clear about our vision
- Being sincere and honest
- Having respect for private family business
- Giving people real roles
- Appreciating diversity of approach and opinion
- Building trust
- Taking time to work at and through issues
- Using good judgement
- Using the visions and questions as filters
- Commitment over time
- Creative brainstorming
- A spirit of optimism that problems can be solved.
- Taking time to stop, reflect and celebrate.
- Having a dream and keeping it alive.
- Expecting things to keep changing – life is a journey.
- Having somebody take responsibility for the ongoing facilitation.

Who to Ask?

People you trust, who share your vision, who are supportive and who are willing to share the journey. Ordinary people who:

- Want to play a role
- Want an ongoing positive relationship with the person
- Can provide things that money can never buy
- Can provide things that all the professional services and therapies can never provide.
- Are willing to work together towards a common dream
- Are available to meet regularly and have time to work together

References

Chernets, Gillian, Canada. *“Support Circles”*.
Forest, Pearpoint and Snow, (Canada) *Natural Support Systems – Families, Friends and Circles*.
Rodgers, Margaret – *“What’s a Support Circle”*