

# Making Connections

**Rob Otorespec from Circles Network – a national voluntary organisation working towards building inclusive communities – discusses how Circles of Support and Person Centred Planning approaches can provide a valuable support framework for individuals with special needs.**

Part of the challenge of building inclusive communities is to address the exclusion that certain members of society experience. Children with physical impairments, learning difficulties and challenging behaviour are often at risk of being socially isolated. They may live in the community but it does not follow that they are necessarily part of it. Enabling children to make connections and build meaningful friendships with others is at the heart of creating fully inclusive communities.

## **What are Circles of Support?**

A Circle of Support is a committed and informal group of people who meet regularly, aided by a facilitator, to help someone achieve their personal goals in life. The 'circle' acts as a natural support network around that person, and this "focus person" is in control both in deciding who to invite to join the circle and where to direct the circle's energy. The circle can be made up of quite a mix of people including parents, family members, neighbours and friends. They are involved because they care enough about the focus person to give their time and energy to help that person overcome obstacles and barriers, in order to increase the choices open to them.

## **What is Person Centred Planning?**

Person Centred Planning is a process of life planning for individuals based on the values of inclusion and the social model of disability. It creates a comprehensive portrait of who a person is and what they want to accomplish in their life, actively involving everyone who is important, including family, friends, support workers and so on. The person centred planning process is owned and controlled by the person, who is always central, and whose dreams and aspirations lie at its heart.

## **Support at school**

Every child has a right to an education but some may need and want the kind of support not readily offered as part of the school curriculum. Children and young people with disabilities may need specific types of support in order to be fully included in school life. By setting up an active circle of support in the classroom, and more importantly using a person centred approach, a child or young person with special needs can have a say and make choices about their school experience. It is a way to help empower a focus person with a "voice".

## **Case Study**

Sarah was not very happy at school where her behaviour was often judged as being "inappropriate" and "difficult". At the age of 9, this young girl with learning difficulties was rapidly being excluded from her educational experiences and natural interaction with her peers. This was obviously of great concern to Sarah's parents but the school were very open minded and welcoming towards the involvement of Circles Network. A facilitator explained to the school how the process might work and after getting to know Sarah and her parents, her teacher was approached. In this case, the time and place identified for the circle were the last 25 minutes of the lunch break in the library every other Tuesday.

With prior input from the parents and the teacher, Sarah was helped to invite certain children into her circle. During the circle time the children were shown the values of inclusion in practice through inclusive play and games. They were also encouraged to consider and to talk positively about Sarah and make their own thoughts and observations. This helped to increase their understanding of just how important interaction and friendships are to everyone. In this case several children accepted the invitation to join Sarah's circle and more have since asked to join. After seeing the enthusiasm of the children, the Classroom Assistant offered to facilitate the circle every week with ongoing support from Circles Network. The Circles Network facilitator attends the circle periodically in order to help address certain issues and Sarah's behaviour and life in school has been seen to improve. By helping the children understand Sarah's individuality and by using a person centred approach, the level of consistent positive interaction with her peers has increased.

### **Setting up a circle**

A Circles Network facilitator can guide you through the process of setting up a circle.

### **Practical considerations:**

Consult and raise awareness with all appropriate school staff about the purpose and reasons for starting a circle

There should only be one focus person in any circle

Provide a safe environment. The needs and well being of all children are of paramount importance

Provide a non-judgmental environment. Children should be given the opportunity to interact naturally. Making mistakes is an integral part of the learning process.

### **Benefits:**

Peer interaction. Opportunity to learn from each other. (The experience will benefit all the members of the circle.)

The circle embraces diversity and focuses on children's gifts

Building and strengthening community links and increasing the chances of making and developing valuable friendships

An opportunity for empowerment. Value is placed on an individual's choices.

Overcoming social exclusion and making a positive difference to the quality of school life.

### **Adopting person centred approaches**

There would appear to be a very strong case for speeding up the process by which all services and agencies adopt a person centred approach in their work, especially with children and young people. It has been conclusively proved that the appropriate and sensitive use of Circles of Support and Person Centred Planning empowers the focus person and those closest to them, to take more control of their life and the choices they make.

Anger and aggression are often a result of not being listened to properly or as a result of feeling misunderstood. Some children are expected to be able to express themselves in a way everyone can understand, often without actually knowing how. Person centred approaches can be used to really listen to children and young people, to allow them to find their own voice, and to have a real say in their future.

**Circles Network runs a number of projects that support children and young people who are isolated or at risk of social exclusion. The Children's Project, funded by BBC Children in Need, supports children with learning difficulties, physical impairments and/or mental health issues across the UK.**

If you would like further information on the project or on Circles Network providing training and consultancy contact:

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Circles Network is a national charity and voluntary organisation with its own personal and professional development academy and regional offices supporting its work throughout the United Kingdom.

Circles Network is renowned for building inclusive communities on the foundations of justice, advocacy, empowerment and friendship. The charity works with people of all ages who have become socially excluded or at risk of isolation through disability, disadvantage or long term illness.

Circles Network's vast experience and reputation for highly creative and pioneering approaches have built an unparalleled expertise in the following fields:

- Circles of Support
- Person Centred Planning and Life Building
- Individual and Collective Independent Advocacy
- Family Empowerment and Parenting Skills
- Three Dimensional Community Services and Self-Directed Support
- Peer Mentorship and Befriending
- Transition Planning and Support for those Leaving Care
- Community Outreach and Time Banks
- Equine Facilitated Learning.

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