

Fact Sheet: Circles of Support

What is a circle of support?

A circle of support involves a group of people coming together to help promote and support the goals, interests and needs of a person with disability.

It involves the intentional building of relationships around a person who may be vulnerable because of disability.

A circle of support is made up of people who care about the person with disability and his or her family. Circles of support generally range in size from the intimate (3-4 people) to the expansive (10-12 people) and can be made up of a range of people including family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, colleagues, team and community members, neighbours, support workers and employers. Importantly, members are not paid to be involved.

Some circles meet just to plan and strategise, some circles are involved in both planning and in taking an active role in the social life of a person with disability.

Among the things a circle of support can do is assist the focus person to: create a positive vision for their future, identify and work towards their aspirations and dreams, overcome barriers (e.g. by advocating on their behalf), move into a home of their own, pursue interests in the community, generate ideas and share wisdom, build and strengthen their networks and safeguards and share in the celebration of achievements.

Every circle of support is different. The nature of the people who participate in the circle, how often they come together, the issues that are covered and the formality of meetings can vary vastly.

I wanted to be more involved but was nervous that I'd come across as imposing by offering a hand. I was delighted when I was invited to join her circle of support!

- NSW circle member

How can a circle of support be useful?

Many of us have friends or informal networks that we rely on when we need advice, when we are in crisis and when we want to share our triumphs. Yet for many people with disability, these ordinary community connections don't necessarily exist automatically – they may require facilitation. Circles can help this to happen.

Creating a circle of support is one intentional strategy that some families have used as a way of assisting a person with disability to develop meaningful relationships with people who can provide ideas, guidance, relationships and enhance opportunities for community connections.

What families have said about circles of support:

- Things happen because of the connections people have.
- Problems that seemed intractable were solved.
- You never know where an idea will end until it's discussed.
- I thought about starting a circle a long time before we got started. I decided we had more to gain by bringing in more people than we had to lose by taking a risk and asking people to be involved.
- I decided that I couldn't come up with all the ideas myself and that starting a circle could bring in some fresh perspectives.
- You need to create a space in your life for a circle of support. They aren't *the* answer but a circle can be a terrific safeguard and a source of inspiration.
- My son has had more confidence since the circle started. People who he likes come together and are there to listen to him and make his plans real. It's created a space for him to be heard.
- People really like being involved.



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