



# Circles of Support



*Resourcing Families* is an initiative of Family Advocacy that provides information and ideas about building informal supports, establishing networks and developing, implementing, directing and sustaining individualised, self directed supports.

*Resourcing Families* would like to thank and acknowledge the many people who have contributed ideas and shared experiences that have helped inform this document.

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## 1. Circles of support - what are they?

In simple terms, a circle of support involves a group of people coming together to help formulate, promote and support the goals of a person with disability.

Starting a circle of support involves the intentional building of relationships around a person who might be vulnerable because of disability. They are based on an understanding of the importance of relationships in our life and our need to belong in the community.

The circle includes the person with disability to the extent possible.

The nature of the people who participate in the circle, how often they come together, the issues that are covered and the formality of the meetings can vary vastly between circles of support but they are made up of people who care about the person and are willing to help them think about their life. They can also change over time for any single circle as circumstances change. In fact, every circle will be different.

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.

It has been suggested that circles of support or supportive networks can be thought of as a type of glue. Without people in our life who care about us and who can help us to think through problems, anyone of us could easily become “unstuck” (Kalms, 2007).

In recent times there has been some confusion about what a circle of support is. All kinds of groupings have been described as circles of support.

Adding to the confusion, several terms have been used interchangeably to describe circles of support. These include “networks of support” and “circles of friends”. This can create some uncertainty about what is being discussed.

What the gathering is called doesn't really matter but there are some key characteristics that should be present.

When we are describing a circle of support, what we are talking about is the coming together of people in a way that is planned, intentional and around the interests of a single person with disability.

## 2. Are circles of support a new idea?

Records suggest that the concept of circles of support started in Canada in the early 1980s and networks now exist around the world.

Not surprisingly, a quick internet search reveals circles discussed by numerous organisations in Canada, but also in the UK, in the United States, in New Zealand and in Australia.

The organisations vary in how much information that they have to share. Some run workshops, some sell resources, some have articles that you can copy. Most have links to other sites.

It is difficult to know how many circles of support exist. Some circles are facilitated by formal organisations but others are private arrangements between families and their friends. There is no need for any service or external involvement for a circle of support to start and thrive. Many are simply made up of ordinary people who have decided that it's a good idea.

There are a range of web sites that discuss the concept of circles of support and several are noted below. Please note that Resourcing Families has not contributed to these web sites.

### **PIN (Planned Individual Networks)**

PIN is a Western Australian not-for profit organisation, created by families to support people with disability and their families to plan and develop for a secure and fulfilling future.

[www.pin.org.au](http://www.pin.org.au)

### **PLA (Personalised Lifestyle Assistance)**

PLA is a Victorian community advisory service that supports people with disability, their families and interested others, to live fulfilling lives in the community.

[www.plavic.net.au](http://www.plavic.net.au)

## **Mamre Association Inc. – Pave the Way**

Mamre is a Queensland association that has established 'Pave the Way', which specifically focuses on resourcing people with disability and their families.

You can find useful information and stories about circles of support from the following links:

[www.pavetheway.org.au/families/circles.php](http://www.pavetheway.org.au/families/circles.php)

[www.pavetheway.org.au/home/stories.php](http://www.pavetheway.org.au/home/stories.php) (checkout the article *Building Intentional Lifelong Supports* by Sharon Bourke).

[www.pavetheway.org.au/home/stories-pave.php](http://www.pavetheway.org.au/home/stories-pave.php)

## **PLAN (Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network)**

PLAN is a Canadian family led organisation that was established by and for families committed to future planning and securing a good life for their relative with a disability.

[www.plan.ca](http://www.plan.ca)

### 3. How can they be useful?

*People who have disabilities are always at risk of becoming isolated and surrounded by people who are paid to be in their life. Together, people in a Support network/circle develop a shared vision of a safe and secure present and future for the individual (Chernets, G. as cited in Ward, J., 2010).*

The life experiences of people with disability are often different and different in a negative way, than for those who do not have a disability label.

Circles of support have been used as a way to safeguard people with disability from negative experiences and increase positive ones.

For this reason, when circles are formed around the world, it is generally because those starting the circle have recognised a range of assumptions that include:

- people with disability are at risk of becoming isolated and surrounded only by people who are paid to be part of his or her life
- people keep people safe
- relationships give life meaning
- some people find it difficult to promote their own interests
- people often need an invitation to be involved and to make a committed contribution to the life of someone else.

By inviting people to become part of a circle of support they are more likely to feel that they can make a contribution and be committed to the person with disability at the centre of the circle.

Judith Snow, a person with disability, describes 4 different circles of relationships that we all have. By thinking about these circles of relationships, the vulnerability of people with disability can become more obvious (Snow, J., 1998).



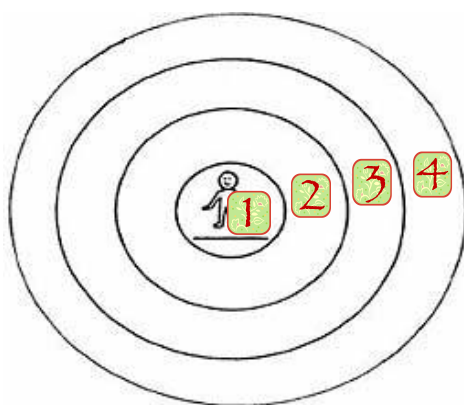
The circles described are as follows:

**Circle One:** The “**CIRCLE OF INTIMACY**” includes those closest to us. These are people that are so important to us that their absence would have a significant impact. They could be family members or very close friends.

**Circle Two:** The “**CIRCLE OF FRIENDSHIP**” consists of people who are friends or relatives with whom we could share a movie or go out for dinner but are not those who we consider our most dear friends or those we must see regularly.

**Circle Three:** The “**CIRCLE OF PARTICIPATION**” is where you belong and includes the names of the people or organisations you participate with in life. This could contain where you work, your school, clubs you attend, sporting teams, or where you participate and interact with people. Some of the people in Circle 3 may later be in Circle 1 or 2 if a relationship develops! Circle 3 is characterised as “the garden for sowing future relationships”.

**Circle Four:** The “**CIRCLE OF EXCHANGE**” is made up of paid people – those that are in our lives because they are paid to be. This could include people like doctors, teachers, dentists, social workers, therapists, hairdressers, car mechanics and beauticians (Davis, K., 2005).



If the circle of relationships was completed for a person with developmental disability and for a person without, the two pictures would probably look quite different.

For many people with disability, there are people in Circle One and Circle Four with fewer people in other circles (Davis, K., 2005).

Circles of support are one tool for attempting to think through ways of redressing this imbalance.

Some circles of support have used this exercise as a way for circle members to have a better understanding of the vulnerability of people with disability.

Where circles of support have been most useful, circle members have shared a clear vision about the importance of people with disability being included in their communities.

Much has been written about how circles of support can be helpful, especially for children and young people. Reasons stated include:

- they bring together people who care about the person and people who have skills that the family might not yet have (Burke, C. 2006)
- they nurture relationships and offer opportunities to develop real friendships
- they focus on the person as an individual with gifts and capacities – someone with their own views and beliefs, with a right to self-determination and a lot to offer the community
- they help people build dreams and identify what needs to be done to make these happen
- they help develop an action plan of how positive change will be achieved (Burke, C., 2006)
- they assist with planning by bringing together fresh ideas, perspectives and skills
- they are safeguards for the future. ‘They can become a forum for commitment and security – people who know and care will be there over time to make sure the individual is supported and safe’ (Chernets, G., as cited in Ward, J., 2010)
- they help other family members and those close to the person with disability better understand what’s involved in providing support, and therefore help with succession planning
- they can ‘provide companionship, relationships, fun and celebration’ (Chernets, G. as cited in, Ward, J., 2010).

*Case study one:*

A circle of support for a 12 year old girl with disability was used as a practical way of increasing her social interaction. The family felt isolated and in need of support.

A book was started that detailed things she liked doing. The circle helped prioritise interests for people to share in over the school holidays. The girl has been taken on a range of outings of interest to her.

In the past, the family would have withdrawn from difficult or confronting situations. The circle made challenging obstacles doable and goals became things that people wanted to see fulfilled. For example, people in the circle have assisted in planning for her Bat Mitzvah – an important rite of passage that may have been skipped. Some people in the circle have been involved in planning other Bat Mitzvahs which has made it easier to think through the steps.

*Case study two:*

Circles have also taken on an advocacy role. One circle heard about challenges a person with disability was experiencing because of the actions of a service. The family felt too vulnerable to speak out. The circle included respected members of the local community who took up the issues with the service. This completely changed the power dynamic and the issues were resolved.

*Case study three:*

One family had a long term goal for their daughter to move into a home that suited her. The circle helped them think of fun and creative ways that she could build her skills, her confidence and her connections to make the move more successful.

One event that the circle is planning is an Italian feast. Skills in shopping, cooking, internet research, travel and communication are being acquired in a way that is fun rather than intimidating. They are planning the menu, looking up and testing out recipes, travelling to get ingredients, purchasing ingredients and drafting the invitation. The person at the centre of the

circle now has new confidence and is described as a “changed woman” who now initiates suggestions. The Italian feast will be fun for the circle, too!

The following list is intended to provide ideas for circle meetings. It is not exhaustive.

- Thinking about the strengths and qualities of a person with disability and helping to build on those
- Having a plan for the future that is likely to lead to a good and secure life for the person with disability
- Identifying areas that are less positive in a person’s life and how that may be changed
- Identifying and developing interests
- Identifying areas for skill development
- Thinking through life after school
- Moving out of home
- Developing relationships and connections
- Developing social roles
- Considering work and/or volunteering opportunities
- Thinking through obstacles to achieving goals
- General problem solving

## 4. What are the practicalities?

Each circle of support is different. Each family and group will approach the circle in a different way. There are no rules, and each circle will find its way as it decides what works best for the people involved. What follows is only a very rough guide.

### ➤ How long?

Circle meetings typically last for about 2 hours. Some circles have the more “formal” part of the meeting in the first hour, followed by a meal or drinks in the second hour. Of course, meeting times can vary depending on what works best for the group and what is to be thought through. One circle who was thinking through a five year plan set aside several hours. This was a mutual decision so that issues could be really considered and there could be breaks and time for reflection. People had a great day and a plan emerged from the process.

### ➤ How often?

Circles tend to meet regularly and according to the availability and focus of the group. Meeting once every six weeks, or two months are typical time frames. The advice from circle members is to ‘see how things go’. Start with fairly regular meetings – say every 6 weeks – and then adjust to what suits. No matter how often the group meets, if things are being achieved then the circle is serving a useful purpose.

### ➤ Where?

Circles often take place in the home of the person with disability – in the lounge room, around the kitchen table, or wherever they feel most comfortable. There is also no reason why the circle can’t be hosted by different members of the circle on a rotating basis. It is also possible to seek out a more neutral venue like a meeting room or a quiet corner of a cafe.

### ➤ Does my family member with disability participate in the circle?

The person with disability should be at the centre of the circle and participate to the extent possible.

### ➤ What if we’re talking about sensitive and upsetting issues?

Circles can talk about a range of issues that can be difficult to hear – such as the person’s vulnerabilities, isolation, and loneliness. It can be very useful to have these discussions with circle members, so that they have a good understanding of the obstacles in the person’s life. At the same time, it might not be appropriate to have all of these conversations with the person at the centre of the circle present.

How the circle manages this depends on the nature of the discussion and the preferences of the person involved and their family. For example, a parent has told us that before discussing things that might upset her son she asks if he would like to go and watch TV while they talk about “things that make me sad”. He is happy to do so, and this lets the family talk openly and honestly, without worrying about causing distress to him.

## 5. Who should I ask and how?

A common stumbling block for families involves thinking about who should be involved in the circle and actually asking people to take part.

Deciding on who could be involved in the circle of support should not be rushed. Take your time and think broadly.

An obvious place to start is other family members and family friends – the “nearest and dearest”.

Anyone connected to the person and who shows a genuine interest in their wellbeing can potentially be involved, including neighbours or members of a club or association like a church or gym.

The person at the centre of the circle should be involved in deciding who will be invited to the extent possible.

Come up with a list of potential circle members. Not everyone on the list will be able to participate, but you won't know if you don't ask!

There is an invitation check list below. It may be useful to ensure that you have considered people from a range of contexts.

- Friends
- Relatives who love and support you
- People you trust e.g. someone who attends your local meditation group or church
- Ordinary people who are part of a typical neighbourhood and community e.g. the next door neighbour/ other people from your street
- People who know and understand you or are prepared to develop that understanding e.g. an ex work colleague
- People who believe in the family member with a disability e.g. a teacher who took a special interest or a gym instructor who has been helpful

- People who have supported efforts on behalf of the family member with a disability e.g. parents, partners or friends of other family members

Don't panic if the people able to be involved in the circle are not as numerous or diverse as you would like. Whoever becomes involved in the circle may be able to help you think through how to add to the depth of the circle.

- Should paid staff – such as support staff - be included in the circle?

This is a really a matter for you and the person in your family. There is no reason why they can't be included if they would like to be involved, but they shouldn't be paid to attend. Participation in circles should be entirely voluntary and for those people who are close to the person at the centre.

- How many people need to be included?

There is no rule, but a circle might have as few as four or five members.

Some people have even started with three members, making up what they described as an “arc” of support.

There is of course no maximum number of participants – although the meeting must be manageable and give everyone a chance to contribute.

The size of your circle is not that important – it's how it can help the person at the centre which really matters.

*“It is not important how many people are involved in a circle meeting. You can have an effective meeting with 3 people or with 10 people. People talk, issues arise – lots of things can be solved,” Circle member.*

- Nobody to ask?

Some people have suggested that there is nobody they could ask to be involved. This may be because the person is new to the country or area or, because they have become isolated or worn out over time.



Maria who has been part of a circle of support, suggests that if this sounds like you but you still think a circle of support could be useful, don't give up.

*“Just start by making a list of everyone you know and just send a simple invitation to a morning or afternoon tea. Once you sit down and put it out, it is amazing who is available. Who emerges from this process will surprise you.”*

If you are still stuck, it could mean that some preliminary thought needs to be given to increasing the people you and your family member with disability interact with. There are a whole range of ways you could do this depending on your interests and where you are. *Resourcing Families* can help you think through the possibilities.

Some of these ideas require more time and effort than others. Some can be undertaken by the whole family, others by the person with disability in your family.

- Be seen at the same places at the same time consistently – like the local café
- Garden in your front yard at about the same time each weekend. You will be surprised how many people say hello
- Organise a street picnic and go along
- Invite neighbours in for drinks
- Offer to bring in the mail when your neighbours go on holiday
- Participate in local initiatives – like the bush regeneration group
- Look through the local paper and see what opportunities may be coming up to attend community events/classes/volunteering opportunities
- Attend local events like fairs and concerts. Consider offering to volunteer with organising or setting up for the event next time

➤ Afraid to ask?

Asking can be the hardest step. Many people find it difficult to ask people to become more involved in the life of their family. Many have said that they are afraid that they will feel hurt if people say no. Others have not wanted to ask people with busy lives to take on another responsibility. Others have lacked confidence or been unsure of what to ask for.

Taking this step will come more easily if there is a shift from thinking “I am inviting people to a burdensome task” to “I am inviting people to contribute in a positive way that will be a valuable experience from which they will benefit” (Bourke, S., 2009).

One circle member has suggested that it can also be helpful to think about the process of prioritising a circle of support as you would any other area of life. For example, you may be busy but if you take the step of hiring a personal trainer, you make appointments, diarise those appointments and follow through. They have suggested that the same is true for circles. Once committed, people prioritise the circle and attend meetings.

*“It works beautifully and the structure is the key.”* Circle member

How prepared you are, the way you ask someone to become involved and being thoughtful about the process, can also reduce any anxiety you may be feeling and increase the likelihood of a positive response.

If you don't feel comfortable doing the asking, having someone else take on that task is one way to remove some stress for you and get the process moving.

*“I have a friend who is well connected and has a confident personality... she was perfect to do the asking. It didn't faze her.”* Circle member

➤ When do you ask?

It is useful to be thoughtful about the best time to ask for someone's involvement. This will be a time when there are minimal distractions and you and the person being asked are not rushed.

➤ Where do you ask?

Will it be over the phone, in person, or by letter or email? Sometimes an attractive invitation to a gathering can be a way of informing people of what you are planning and allowing them time and space to consider.

➤ Why are you asking?

It's important that you are clear about why you asking – what are your goals and visions? Why will having the person involved in a circle of support help the person with disability and

their family? What are you hoping to get out of their involvement? Is it envisaged that the circle be used just for planning or will it also take actions? You don't have to have all the answers but providing a broad overview can be helpful.

- What are you asking for?

At its most basic, the only commitment you are seeking is that people come to circle meetings, engage in the process and share a person's life.

It can be helpful to let people know the basics of what a circle of support is, how they might contribute ideas at the meetings and follow through on some action that the group decides on.

People will also want to have an idea about what their time commitment could be.

The experience of others suggests that many people think of being part of a circle of support as a positive opportunity.

*"It's lovely seeing everyone every couple of months. It's really enjoyable".* Circle member

Common responses to being asked to be part of a circle of support include:

- It would be a privilege/pleasure
- I have always wanted to help and to be involved, but did not want to offend you by intruding
- I have always admired what you do for your son/daughter
- I would love to be involved (Bourke, S., 2009).

Most people, who have taken the plunge and asked, have been pleasantly surprised.

People will join a support circle for a wide variety of reasons. These might include:

- respect for the family and the friendship they share
- love that they hold for the family member and/or the family
- they already have a belief in the person and want a good future for them and see support circles as an opportunity to help that happen

- they want to be part of a group working towards positive change.

Whatever the reason for coming, people speak positively about the process - how it is a privilege to be asked and how it has changed their own lives and deepened their relationships. People have spoken about changed attitudes, having their understanding enriched, their skills validated and being valued by the family (Bourke, S., 2009).

- Do I need a facilitator?

Circles tend to operate more effectively when someone is coordinating the flow of meetings and where at least one person has a firm understanding of the underlying vision for the person with disability. This could be the same person but, if not, the person coordinating the meeting will need to liaise closely with the holder or holders of the vision.

The role of facilitator can be performed by any member of the circle who has volunteered to take on the role, or it can be role shared between circle members. Sometimes, someone in the circle has qualities or experiences that make them a natural choice. In other circles, people have grown into the role.

Some families have decided to pay someone to facilitate the circle.

- Do I need a paid facilitator?

As has already been discussed, circles of support should be made up of people who have natural, freely given, connections with the person at the centre – not people who are paid to be there.

Many families have circles that are coordinated by a parent, sibling, friend or relative or where circle members simply take turns.

Some families do opt to employ someone to fulfil some organising/administrative tasks and to run meetings. Other families have a facilitator appointed as part of a funded organisational initiative. This may be envisaged as a short term or long term role.

If there is a person in a paid role, it will be important to ensure that they understand the limits of their role and the purpose of the circle. It will also be important to ensure that the focus of meetings is around the person with disability.

- Don't be offended if people don't join the circle!

There may be many reasons why a person can't commit to being in a circle, such as their own time commitments. It's important to remember that this is not a personal rejection of you or your family member and to not let this affect the relationship that you already enjoy with them.

Keeping the door open could lead to membership at a later time.

#### **a. Verbal invitations**

If you decide that a conversation is the way you will invite people to become involved remember to think about:

- Who will ask?
- When?
- Where?

The first conversation may not include any direct invitation to be part of the circle. You may start more slowly by talking about the concept of getting together a group of respected people to help in your thinking and planning.

A follow up conversation could be an invitation to a get-together to talk about exploring future possibilities. It is probably best not to use too much jargon at this stage. Inviting people to afternoon tea to hear more about what you are planning sounds less intimidating than an abrupt invitation to join the circle.

It is prudent to be ready to answer some questions if asked, such as:

- the initial commitment – e.g. an invitation to come to afternoon tea / a bbq / a get-together to discuss the possibility of a planning group
- why you are asking

- why you are asking the person – e.g. You value their knowledge, your son or daughter has suggested it
- when and where the event will take place
- how long the get-together will be
- what will happen – for example, a conversation followed by sharing a meal.

**b. Written invitations**

If you have decided that asking in person is too daunting, or may be too abrupt or confronting, inviting others to join a circle by writing a letter or sending a card is a good option.

This invitation could be on nice and/or colourful paper and be along the lines of:

You're invited to a gathering at Kate and Scott's house at:

12 Wentworth Avenue, Turramurra

on Saturday 30th December between 3.30 and 5.30 p.m.

We want to gather some friends and family to talk about Scott's future and explore what can be done now to help ensure that he's safe and happy in the coming years.

On that afternoon we would like to tap into the wisdom of a larger group of people who care about Scott and we would welcome your ideas and energy at this discussion.

We hope you can join us for this gathering and then stay on for a bbq afterwards. RSVP to Kate on # by #.

Kate and Scott

## 6. Getting started

### a. The first meeting

The first meeting can set the tone for the meetings that follow. Naturally, people will have a lot of questions and will be a little unsure about what to expect. This meeting should be relaxed and informal to help people get to know each other and understand more about circles of support.

There is no rule about what shape the first meeting will take. It will depend on the family and the participants.

- The first meeting – some things you may need
  - an agenda
  - an overview of what a circle of support is
  - paper and pens
  - someone to take notes
  - drinks and refreshments
  - blu tack (if you want to attach notes to the walls)
  
- The first meeting – other things to consider
  - Who will be responsible for running the meeting?
  - Should notes be taken? Who will take them? Will this person be responsible for taking notes at all future meetings? Can this responsibility be shared amongst circle members on a rotating basis?

*i. Sample agendas for the first meeting.*

What follows is only a guide.

Sample Agenda 1 – Peter’s circle

- Introductions

How long has each person known Peter and how did they meet?

Icebreaker - getting to know one another.

- A brief discussion of circles of support.

What a circle of support is and how it can help Peter have a better life.

- Peter’s life: now and as we would like it to be

This last section provides the circle with a chance to exchange ideas and insights that they have. Of course, Peter, the person at the centre is encouraged to contribute.



Sample Agenda 2 – Angela’s circle

Another alternative agenda for the first meeting could look like this:

2.30pm	Arrival and welcome	Angela, Grace and Steve
2.40pm	Introduction...the get to know you bit!	All
3pm	Discuss format of meetings – processes, minutes, timing, agenda, communication medium, contact between meetings, diaries etc	Angela, Grace and Steve
3.15pm	Discuss purpose of circle, guidelines for the conduct of the meetings, topics etc	All
4.00pm	Meeting dates: When is the best time? How frequently do we meet? Dates for next 4 meetings?	All
4.30pm	Finish meeting Refreshments	

This agenda may be useful where some conversation has already taken place with people attending the meeting. It presumes some knowledge.

### Sample Agenda 3 – Jane’s circle

1. Who is Jane?

A brainstorming session where people are asked to suggest words that provide a picture of the person. Sample words could be: artist, sister, football fan etc.

2. What is Jane’s story so far? A short description of who the person is and where they come from.

3. What are Jane’s strengths, gifts and talents (e.g. sense of humour, as an artist, kindness, generosity etc)

4. What could Jane’s future hold?

5. What are Jane’s dreams?

6. What are Jane’s needs?

Don’t feel that there need to be specific actionable outcomes after the first meeting. The focus is setting the scene.

*“We didn’t make it all the way through the agenda on that first meeting but it gave people a very clear idea of the direction and process they would be engaged in. We made it to brainstorming and got a draft vision. More detailed planning was left for future sessions and has now been done.” Circle member*

- Set the next meeting time and place.

It is important to thank everyone for coming and for their input. It is also a good time to cover any questions that people might still have.

Invite everyone to consider coming to circles of support meetings in the future. Ask that they think about this over the next few days and weeks and get back to you (or the facilitator) as to whether they will continue to come. Make sure that people understand that circles are an informal arrangement and not an onerous process. Agreeing to participate does not mean that they are locking themselves into a heavy workload for any set period of time, or that they

are obliged to attend every meeting regardless of personal circumstances and commitments. They are instead opportunities for people to come together to discuss ways that the person's needs and dreams can be realised.

- Record obstacles and opportunities as they arise.

As you go, record any thoughts that people might have for how the person's goals might be achieved, the things that might get in the way and the means by which these obstacles can be overcome. Of course, this is only the first meeting, so you should not expect that you will have all the answers right way. This is only a beginning.

### **b. After the first meeting**

It can be good to follow up the first meeting with a phone call or a brief letter or email thanking people for attending the first meeting. You can also include any action plan and/or a copy of the notes that were taken.

A sample of what you might say in this letter is:

Thank you for sharing your ideas with us!

Thank you for coming along to our gathering on Saturday. It was great to have you and I thank you for your involvement. I have included some notes that were taken on the night that you might like to have a look at.

As we talked about, we would be very happy for you continue to attend Scott's circle of support. I understand that this may not be possible and am very glad for what you have been able to contribute already. Either way, I know that you will continue to play an important part in Scott's life.

If you have any questions or other ideas please give me a call on \*\*\*\*\*.

Many thanks, Kate

### **c. Action sheets and planning tools**

Circles have used a range of planning frameworks and tools to progress change. These do not need to be complicated.

#### *i. Action Sheets*

Circles of support are not the answer in themselves. They are just a structure for people to become involved in a practical way.

They are a means to help make positive changes in the person's life. The ideas that are discussed in the meeting should be followed through to make sure that this change happens.

*“Circles work best when there are common and tangible goals.”Circle member*

Not every circle will choose to have action sheets or follow up items. However, they can help give focus to what the group has decided and identify who is doing what before the next meeting. Also, as one mother has told us, putting things in writing also helps make sure that she is not left to do all the work all of the time.

This is not to say that every person will have a discrete action item to follow up on each meeting – if this were the case members might feel that their involvement was becoming too time consuming. However, people are usually looking to make a difference and help out where they can. Sharing responsibilities and giving people an opportunity to take action can be both personally rewarding for them, as well supporting both the person at the centre and their family.

One circle member has observed, *“People volunteer to do things more when they see other people volunteer.”*

An action sheet that is completed during the meeting might look like this:

*ii. Action Items*

From meeting 30 November 2010

Action/task	Who	When
Find out costs of Matthew attending swimming lessons	Terry	Next circle meeting 16 Jan
Speak with local environmental groups about volunteering opportunities	Louise	Next circle meeting 16 Jan
Take Matthew to choose invitations for his birthday	Peter	Next circle meeting 16 Jan

Or, another more detailed plan might look like this:

Goal	Action	When	Who	Follow up
Jack will join the scouts	(a) Investigate and obtain contact details of scouting groups in the area	(a) Next 2 weeks	(a) Jack's mum	(a) 4 weeks by Jack's Dad
	(b) Organise meetings with scout leaders and attend	(b) Next 6 weeks	(b) Jack's Uncle	(b) 8 weeks by Jack's Dad

Jeremy Ward (2009)

The follow up column notes who will confirm that the task has been completed and the time frame when this 'follow up' will take place. It gives the doers added impetus to do what they say they will, when they say will. Most of us work better with deadlines and it makes it more likely that tasks will be completed and progressed between meeting dates.

*iii. Agendas for future meetings*

Your approach to an agenda is really a matter for you and the circle that you are involved in. Preparing an agenda and distributing it before a meeting can help people start to think about the issues that will be discussed.

It can also make it possible for people who can't be at the meeting – perhaps including people who live in another country or another state – to provide input for the meeting.

Preparing an agenda should not be seen as a particularly difficult or time consuming process. It can be as simple as a short list of bullet points on which the meeting will be framed.

Naturally, the circle meeting isn't tied to the agenda, if other more immediate issues arise, or a discussion takes you in an unexpected but fruitful path! Agendas are only guides that can help people prepare for what might be covered in the meeting.

➤ Who prepares the agenda?

It depends on the circle. It may be a family member, possibly working with the group facilitator if there is one. Once prepared, this can be forwarded about a week before the planned circle meeting. Other families prefer a much more informal approach and the circle members develop the agenda at the beginning of each meeting.

### *Sample agenda*

The contents of an agenda will obviously depend on what the circle has been discussing previously, as well as new issues that are identified by the person at the centre, their family, and circle members. A sample agenda could be:

#### Scott's Circle of Support

Agenda for meeting on 8 August 2011.

1. Review of notes from last meeting and any issues arising
2. Update on action items
3. Making new community connections – opportunities for Scott
4. Volunteer opportunities for Scott
5. Planning Scott's upcoming birthday party.

If you have any items that you think should be added to the agenda, please call me on \*\*\*\*\* before this meeting.

#### *iv. Calendars as a tool*

If you want the circle to perform actions – not just be a planning circle – one strategy is to take a calendar or roster to the meeting.

This can be a useful tool to assist people to understand what the life of the person at the centre of the circle looks like in a tangible way.

It can also be a good tool for organising when things can take place and securing commitments.

*“A calendar can be sent via email and provides a visual understanding of the gaps in a person's life and how they can be filled.” Circle member*

*Sample calendar*

David's week during school holidays (David is aged 14)

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning			Swimming			Swimming at local pool	Attends church
Afternoon							Lunch with family
Evening	Attends gym with brother		Attends gym with brother			Attending theatre group	

By sharing this calendar, people can see where there are gaps in David's week.

Jessica's week (Jessica is aged 25)

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning	Volunteers at local organic food co-op	Volunteers at National park nursery	Assists with local bush regeneration group	Attends sculpture class	Works at Café	Goes to Café x for brunch at 11am	
Afternoon		Volunteers at National park nursery		Completes any follow up for art class		Attends Art class	
Evening	Yoga class		Pilates class			Dinner with members of art class	

Jessica's week has key themes around her interests but some clear gaps when nothing is happening.



## 7. What are the limits of a circle?

*“You need to be ready to make a circle of support part of your life if it is to work well. It can’t be forced. You need to make space in your life for a circle.”* Circle facilitator

Circles are not the magic answer that will address all the issues in the life of your family member. They are a means to help build a better life, not an end.

Circles of support can be hard work and may take some time before they achieve significant positive change.

If you start out with unrealistic expectations, a circle of support can be seen to become just one more thing that has to be organised, facilitated and maintained.

Circles can languish and eventually dissolve if they are seen as an onerous task that should be done instead of a means of providing practical advice, solving or unraveling problems, generating ideas or emotionally supporting the people at the centre of the group.

Circles don’t produce miracles overnight!

This is not to say that having a circle cannot be a transformative, life changing experience. However, it is necessary to have realistic expectations and to see the circle as one of the vehicles to invite other people into the person’s life to help them achieve their goals and have their needs met.

If this is something you decide to pursue for your family member, find an ally, take it slowly, celebrate the gains - big and small - and give the circle time to develop. Circles provide an opportunity to develop and improve the life of a person with disability and their families; the opportunity is valuable and cannot be hurried (Richards, S., 2007).

## 8. Maintaining a circle into the future

People who have been involved in circles of support have offered some tips and ideas that they hope you will find useful.

- Don't feel disappointed if people in the circle can't make it to a meeting or meetings. It's not personal – people have things they have to do – it doesn't mean that they don't care.
- There are some young people involved in a circle I'm part of. They skip a lot of the meetings but they get a copy of the minutes and are part of all the social activities and go out regularly. One of them just came back from overseas and he was completely up to date with everything that was happening in the circle.
- Not everyone in the circle has to be chatty. People contribute in different ways.
- Stress can dissipate when there are a group of people present – just to help come up with ideas and solutions.
- It is good to be specific about help needed.
- When people became involved in the circle they got to know things about John, such as his artistic streak and good sense of colour. This has opened up thinking about new possibilities. One member of the circle who also has artistic skills has suggested that John go to her place to develop cooking skills and artistic creations.
- Always celebrate birthdays. These parties have great attendance. Everyone loves a party.
- A terrific thing we did was to create a vision of him living his life in five years time – doing all kinds of positive things we would be helping him achieve. It made us think about him and his potential differently.
- 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.
- It is important to re-visit the purpose of the circle regularly, to ensure that it doesn't get sidetracked or become focused on someone else's needs. For example, a person who resists the formal meeting and just wants lots of social gatherings. These are important, but they must not override the purpose of the circle.

Each circle is unique, and what works for one circle might not be suitable for another. The following are some suggestions that have helped make some circles work:

- being open and honest
- building opportunities to learn to build trust
- people having roles and tasks that they assume when comfortable
- taking the time that is necessary to grow rather than to force outcomes
- being clear about what the family wants for the future
- being positive – working for a solution rather than staying embedded in the problem
- making use of people’s gifts and wisdoms
- choosing people who you will invite to be part of the circle with thought
- keeping notes for future reference
- doing the ground work to have a considered starting point
- allowing the group to take some responsibility in the future of the group i.e. planning for the continuity, future membership etc
- being welcoming and accepting of the imperfections of people and processes
- having someone facilitate the process
- taking time to celebrate (Bourke, S.2009)
- marking achievement and progress no matter how small or seemingly insignificant will provide encouragement and build enthusiasm (Richards, S.,2007)
- circle members need to feel valued
- people in circles share good times and bad times (Chernets, G. as cited in, Ward, J., 2010).

## 9. References

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