

Creating a Circle of Support

Since birth, we have been creating an intricate network of people in our lives; friends and/or family who are there for us in times of trouble, sorrow, and celebration. Those friends take an interest in us and our lives because we share common threads that bind us to one another. This group is called our Circle of Support or Friends. They are people we value in our lives who help us achieve our dreams or lend a hand when we are in need. We can count on them to be there for us. These relationships are formed in many ways, but generally come from meeting people in different places and environments. Meeting people, for most of us, occurs naturally and for the entirety of our lives. Judith Snow, a woman with a significant disability, explains it further and has described four different circles of relationships that everyone has in their lives.

Circles of Support

Circle One: **The CIRCLE OF INTIMACY** is made up of those who we share great intimacy, our secrets, and heartfelt emotions. These are people or perhaps animals or objects that are so dear to us that their absence would impact us greatly. This may or may not include family members.

Circle Two: **The CIRCLE OF FRIENDSHIP** is made up of those people who are friends or relatives who we call upon to go out to dinner, see a movie, 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 organizations you participate with in life. This could contain spiritual groups, where you work, where you went or go to school, clubs, organizations, athletic teams, or where you participate and interact with people. Some of these individuals may later be in Circle one or two! Circle Three is the garden for sowing future relationships.

Circle Four: **The CIRCLE OF EXCHANGE** is made up of people who are paid to be in our lives. Doctors, teachers, dentists, social workers, therapists, hairdressers, car mechanics, and the like make up the numbers here.

Snow explains that when we look at the four circles for people without disabilities, we can see that there is a fair number in each circle. However, if we were to look at the circles for people with disabilities, especially children, we would see a VERY DIFFERENT PATTERN. For people with disabilities, there may be people in Circle One and Circle Four. Actually, in many instances, circle four explodes with people paid to be in their lives. Circle Three, the key circle, has minimal organizations or social opportunities available for them and thus, children with disabilities are excluded from creating connections to others and developing a true circle of friends or support. This sort of division can put a huge financial and emotion burden on families. A Circle of Support can begin to alleviate some of that strain and burden for the family; however it does take work and planning.

While most of us have an easy and natural time creating wonderful circles of support, people with autism or other disabilities are left to struggle with this aspect of their lives. That is why helping them create a circle of support/friends can be a way to support their ability to develop meaningful relationships.

Creating Circles of Support

How does one go about creating a circle of support/friends?

What are the steps to follow? There are multiple factors to consider and each is crucial to the success of the circle.

First and foremost is to establish who the focus person is. This person is the one who will be the driving force; the center of all discussion and planning. Once this has been established, the planning begins. There must be a "champion" or someone who will see to it that this circle is formed and that there will be follow through from the planning to the implementation stages. In many instances, this is one of the parents or a caregiver for the individual. As time passes and a circle develops, this role may be taken on by others.

Steps to Creating a Circle

Decide who to invite. (Circle members are not paid to be there, it is **voluntary!**) The focus person has a great deal of say about who to invite. Create a list of individuals committed to change, who believe in the focus person, and who would be committed for the long haul. Members can be neighbors, family, community

members, fellow church goers, or members of clubs. There are no limits, but be selective. Invite those people who are willing to take a chance and avoid the people who are skeptical or unsure of change.

Obtain facilitators. It is best to have at least two facilitators; one to lead discussion and one write down the information and do graphics. Interview them as needed to find one that the focus person is comfortable using.

Decide on a location and time. Meetings can be held in a home, church, school, library, back yard, conference room, or any big meeting space that is available. The day of the week and the time can vary depending upon the availability of potential members. Potential times can be immediately after work/school, over the dinner hour, or during the weekend. Sometimes Circle members may want to organize a special event and go to a park, go bowling, or have a pizza party! It is always good to include some refreshments for the meeting: make the meeting as simple or as involved as the focus person desires!

Create and mail invitations to all on invitation list with RSVP date. The invitation can be as simple or as complex as the focus person desires. Some circles have included the reason for the meeting, in a simple and to the point fashion.

Decide on an agenda for meeting with facilitator. What will be discussed? Do people need to understand a 4 circle of support or to learn more about the individual? There are no real rules about agendas, but it should be discussed ahead of time.

Here is one suggested agenda for an initial circle meeting:

1. Introduce all circle members. How long has each person known the focus person and how did they meet? Other questions that help people get to know one another.
2. Review the individual's life as it is now to build a picture and add to existing information.
3. Clarify ideas about the future. Review obstacles and opportunities, discuss these directions, and select a priority.
4. Record obstacles and opportunities as they arise.
5. Make commitments for action.
6. Set the next meeting time and place.

According to Judith Snow, listening to the dreams of the focus person is the primary function of the Circle of Support (PUSH, 2001).

Circle of Support Meeting

On the day of the meeting the focus person, facilitator, and "champion" will want to arrive early to ensure the room is set up for the circle, which means chairs in a circle or semi-circle. This ensures that members of the circle can all see each other during the discussion. This early arrival would also provide time for preparation for the meeting by reviewing any questions that will be asked of the focus person and to be sure that person has had time to think of or generate the answers. (This would be true especially if the person is non-verbal or uses augmentative communication and would need time to prepare answers).

The facilitators would open the meeting and follow the agenda that has been created in a timely manner. Most circle meetings are no longer than 2 hours. At the close of the meeting, members may leave with assignments that would support the circle's efforts to support the focus person. Examples of what circle members may volunteer to do are: helping someone move into their own home, or helping them to develop more relationships by meeting people in the community, school or other community settings. Progress would be reported on at the next meeting which is always set at the end of each Circle gathering. That way everyone will know when they will be sharing what they learn and it is less cumbersome to plan.

Once the Circle has been created and the first meeting has happened, it will become easier to establish the agendas for future meetings and the number of meetings that will be needed. Some circles may initially meet frequently and then taper off, others only meet quarterly and still others meet only as needed. It is best to maintain a consistent meeting pattern to ensure quality and keep the interest and commitment of the circle members.

A Circle of Support can create many wonderful relationships and opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Real friendships can start and lead to a more fulfilling and rich life. It is never too early or never too late to create a Circle of Support.

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Davis, K. (2005). Creating a circle of support. The Reporter,10(2), 3-5.

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Article Source

Indiana Resource Center for Autism

Source URL

<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu>

Last Reviewed

Thursday, January 20, 2022