



Setting Up A Circle of Friends

Everyone deserves friends one of the best ways to help a young disabled person communicate their dreams, wants, needs and ambitions is to form a Circle of Friends around them.

My son has autism and doesn't really speak. I never thought he would ever have any friends of his own but I was wrong.

Jodi has a Circle of Friends who support him and help him to access the things he enjoys.

What Is A Circle Of Friends?

A circle of support is a group of people who commit to meet on a regular basis to discuss and implement strategies to help the person in need. It is made up of people who know, care and love the person and who are therefore in the best position to help them.

Everyone is different so each person's needs will be different and so will their Circle. However, the Circle ensures that the focus person remains central, is empowered and has a voice that is really listened to.

Jodi likes to go walking, on train journeys, bus rides, play badminton, visit restaurants, ice skating, canoeing, trampolining, dancing, bowling, cinema trips.

In many respects he is like any other normal teenager and in an ideal world he would do those things with his friends. However, this is not an ideal world.

As his mother and thirty-four years his senior I don't particularly want to do the things he obviously enjoys and even if I did the experience may not be so good for him with me as it would be with a younger person or someone he didn't see so often. (Remember – A change is as good as a rest sometimes!)

How Do You Find Volunteers?

Quite simple really – **Just ASK**

The first step to getting a Circle is always the most difficult to take. However, don't be discouraged. You will find there are many people only too willing to help and as the Circle becomes established you won't even have to ask. It becomes Viral and some people in the Circle you may never even meet.

Let me give you an example by way of explanation.

One young man was obsessed with football but never left the house. His parents despaired of him ever having any friends.

A young lady who was also interested in football (or maybe it was the players – I'm not sure which) volunteered to take him to a local football match for the remaining games of the season. At first he was reluctant to go but his love of football and his desire to see his local team play got the better of him. He went.

The first couple of weeks were pretty uneventful but the players got used to seeing him on the touch-line clearly excited when they scored. On both occasions they won.

The next two weeks, however, the young man was ill. The young lady still went along and when asked where her companion was she explained the situation. Those weeks the team lost.

The following week, upon his return, one of the players went up to the young man and said that the team had missed him and hoped he would bring them luck. Needless to say the team won and the young man was invited to the dressing room to meet the players.

After that the young man was adopted as the team mascot and because he had a common interest with the players, i.e. football he was invited to away games, parties, etc. and frequently left the house.

So you see from one volunteer came many and opened up a whole new range of opportunities for that young man.

A good place to start is with family, friends and neighbours. They are always the ones who say "If you want anything just let me know" but I know from my own personal experience you probably never have.

You'll be surprised what happens once you take the first step.

Volunteers are not paid and their input and role can be as great or small as they wish. It could be that they would be able to offer advice, teach a skill, go out on activities or simply chill. They might just even lend a favourite CD, video or book, or bake a cake. Everyone will know the person in a different way and can offer various opportunities.

The possibilities are endless but even the smallest gesture can make a big difference.

What Do You Do Once You Have Some Volunteers?

A Circle of Friends can help people with disabilities become more included in the community and help break down the barriers. It can help turn their dreams and aspirations into reality.

Regardless of how many volunteers you have you will need to hold regular meetings. Once every 4 – 6 weeks should be sufficient.

Hold the meetings wherever is convenient and **where the focus person feels comfortable**. It doesn't have to be at your home. Make it a relaxed and informal affair.

Circles are all about helping and having fun at the same time!

The focus person should be included in the discussions. The idea is to find out what they would like to do and what opportunities there might be coming up in the next 4 – 6 weeks which the volunteers might be able to help them access.

If any suggestions are forthcoming then one or more of the volunteers may agree to be responsible for making them happen.

These are noted down – i.e. Who, When and Where so that at the next meeting the notes can be reviewed to see if they actually took place and if so, what was the outcome.

Summary of Meetings

The meetings should only take between one and two hours and cover -

- **Who Came?**
- **What Has Happened Since The Last Meeting?**
- **What Is Coming Up?**
- **Who Will Be Doing What?**
- **When Is The Next Meeting?**

For me the Circle of Friends has proved invaluable. Not only has it enabled my son to enjoy a more varied and fulfilling lifestyle but it has taken the responsibility off me.

Also, his friends have become my special friends too and everyone deserves to have friends don't they?

GOOD LUCK

Recipe for a Circle of Support

Ingredients:

People - We all need people who can help us think and do things differently

Diary - So you can plan time and dates and not let actions slip

Light Bulb - Ideas and creativity

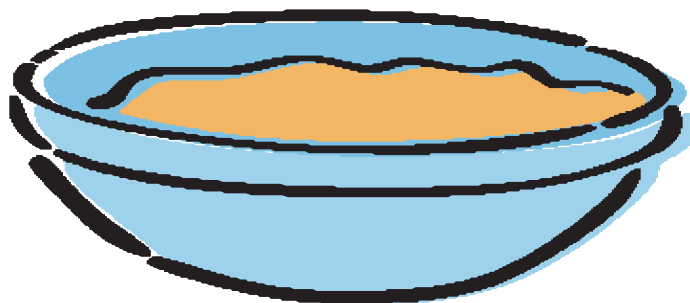
Heart - Love and respect

Clock - Commitment to making real change happen

Mix all the ingredients together



Circle of Support



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