

Natural Supports

The world of many people with disabilities is a world of handicap. Often, the only people they know are paid service workers, other labelled people, and family. Services can create barriers in getting to know others. Difficulties in mobility, communication, or social skills can also be barriers. Help from parents, service workers or others is often needed to make contact with a wider range of people.

Services cannot meet all a person's needs. They should not take over people's lives. There has to be a partnership between services and unpaid community members who have an interest in a person with a disability. Community presence does not necessarily lead to growing in relationships.

Building natural supports extends the resources available to people with disabilities.

What can parents do?

Parents can do much to encourage their sons and daughters in getting to know, and be known, by people outside the world of handicap. Setting up a circle of friends is a great way of doing this. A number of parents in the north west have experience of creating circles around their sons and daughters. They would be keen to advise other parents on good ways to do it. In some areas parents are finding funding to help them put more time into this.

What can services do?

Services can attend to several aspects of their operations in order to support relationship development. The following could be used as an organisational audit:

- Policies could state support for widening users' contacts. Such policies should be readily available to all staff.
- A senior manager or director could be identified with responsibility for making sure it gets the attention it deserves.
- In staff recruitment and selection it should be a major consideration. For example, in adverts, job descriptions and person specifications, people who are local to the neighbourhood and embedded in their communities with extensive links bring their own networks to offer to users.
- In staff induction, training, meetings and supervision, network building could be a priority

focus. Staff may need to be given permission to act as enablers in relationship growth.

Contrasting the wide range of acquaintances in our own lives with those of users can help staff to see what needs to be done. Thinking about what helps us to get closer to people can point the way to what will help users.

- A library of books, articles and videos on natural supports could be built up.
- Visits to people at the cutting edge would be helpful.
- People who have experience in network building such as parents in the north west could be invited to talk and advise.
- Funding to appoint someone to co-ordinate building support circles would be an excellent investment from which to learn and develop important experience.
- Planning is needed for each user and for the organisation as a whole.
- Progress can be reviewed in the agency's annual report.

Reading

Nisbet, J., 1992 *Natural Supports in School, at Work, and in the Community for People with Severe Disabilities* Brookes: London.

Perske, R., 1987 *Circles of Friends* Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Pearpoint, J., 1990 *From Behind the Piano: The building of Judith Snow's unique circle of friends*. Toronto: Inclusion Press.

Workshops

Several workshops focus on network building, such as: *Framework for Accomplishment, Personal Futures Planning, Building Support Circles* and the annual Manchester *Building Inclusive Communities*.

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