

A circle of support: a space to blossom

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We started a circle of support this year (early 2010) out of a desire to gather support and information, to help plan for Belinda's future and due to a sense of frustration at the unrealized potential in my daughter Belinda's life.

I had also been carrying all of the tasks of caring for Belinda alone for all of her life. That is a huge task, to do the research, planning, work out what support or funding Belinda might benefit from, fill out all the forms required, and so on and so on! The point came when I realized I needed to step out of my comfort zone and ask for help.

Belinda was very isolated, especially after she left school in 2008, and I understood from my experience and from my reading that there is safety and long term support for Belinda in relationships. The more the better.

I did some research, had some conversations about circles of support and devoured the articles I received. There were underlines and highlights everywhere. I talked about the articles and showed them to the people I know.

When I had a clear picture of what Belinda's circle could look like I sat down with Belinda and talked about who could be involved. She came up with a list of 12 people that included friends from school, her uncle, her brother, her grandparents, a friend and her daughter from circus skills training and a family who had lived next door to my parents and become friends.

By the time we started the circle I had decided that if the worst thing that people could do was say no to being involved - so what? It was too important not to ask.

We sent out a fantastic and creative invitation with photos of Belinda looking lovely.

Based on my preparation, we created an agenda for the first meeting that covered what circles of support are and a bit about their history so people wouldn't think it was something I had made up. We also talked about what was being asked of circle members. In our case, it was to contribute the planning and creative thinking and to share in the decision making and research into the best options for a good life for Belinda.

We talked about what would make up a good life for Belinda and the values that underpin that vision. I found an article by Wendy Stroeve (Clarity of Vision: A compass for the Journey) and an

article by Jeremy Ward (Planning for now, tomorrow and the future) really helpful to help facilitate this. Circle members asked for a copy of each article.

We wanted to find a way to talk about Belinda – her life and her strengths - without making her feel uncomfortable. We decided we would make statements about Belinda and ask her to comment.

So, for example, someone said ‘Belinda, I have observed that you are very good with children, and you really enjoy being with them’, do you agree?

We wrote everything down on butcher’s paper attached to the wall. People could go away and add things and come back.

The first meeting exceeded expectations. It was a great day. People who cared about Belinda and about me came together to share a meal and to talk. It was actually more like a feast than a meal.

To be sitting with friends in this way was such a contrast to the isolation we had felt.

I said I would call people a few days after the meeting to discuss whether they would like to be involved.

Only one of the people we invited has decided not to be part of the circle at this stage.

We have now met three times – at my house and at a friend’s.

We always have nice things to eat, there is an agenda and notes are taken. I facilitate and circle members take it in turn to take the notes. Belinda participates.

We circulate the notes after the meetings by email – including to people who can’t physically be present at the meeting. They can then contribute by sending in comments and suggestions.

So what has changed?

Belinda is 20 and when we started the circle I was thinking through Belinda moving out of home as well as other more immediate goals. People in the circle pointed out that maybe this was a bit premature and more of a long term goal. They suggested that we should think about communication first.

Belinda can’t read or write and has been limited in her communication. Her social opportunities have also been limited - in turn, limiting her communication opportunities.

It became obvious that this was a good place to start – that improved communication would enrich Belinda’s life straight away – as well as when she moves out.

I have now bought a lap top and activated Skype so that she can more easily speak with people. I am also investigating a package that will translate her speech into writing that will allow her to make use of email and control her computer by voice commands enabling her independence in watching DVDs and listening to music as well.

We have also been working on social opportunities. Belinda's life has blossomed since the circle began.

The informal supports we are drawing on have been incredible. Belinda now goes out to have dinner, to the movies, to cafes – just more social things. She goes with friends her age. Sometimes an adult will go to the same venue but sit in a different section – to give them space but make sure things are ok.

We have also obtained an assistance dog for Belinda and now go to an off the leash dog park. At the park we chat to a wide range of interesting people, including musicians and artists. This has provided us with a greater sense of belonging in our local community and more idea of what is going on. We hope it will lead to some new social opportunities.

For some time, Belinda has said she would like to work with children or animals. Now she has the circle and we have clearly stated goals it is easier to share these goals with others. We feel more empowered to do it.

A big opportunity that has opened up as a result of this sharing relates to work. During the winter of 2009 there was an ice rink for 2 months in Katoomba and we went as a family almost every day! We made some good friends, one of whom has just started Family Day Care from her home nearby and has asked Belinda if she would like to be involved. Of course, she does. Having the circle and thinking through Belinda's vision and goals, makes it easy to see if things like this fit into her vision. It means we don't miss opportunities that come her way.

We are now working towards directing Belinda's post school support. We will use the circle to help think through how Belinda can continue to do the things that interest her and increase her skills, opportunities and connections.

I see the circle as a way of making Belinda's life rich and safe. By continuing to expand thinking and experiences and by demonstrating this to others her life continues to bloom.



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