

Planning together: starting small and aiming high

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When we began our son Adam's circle of support about four years ago we weren't quite sure what to expect. At the time, Adam had nearly finished high school and we were very aware that his range of friends would soon diminish. We were also unsure what the future would hold for him.

We had attended a few Family Advocacy events, read some articles and heard from a number of people about the transformative effect that a circle of support could have. Still, we weren't sure where to start, so we approached someone to help get us started.

We decided to invite people to an information session via our very first newsletter for Adam.

This was an opportunity for people to learn and ask questions about circles of support, as well as get a sense of what was involved in being a circle member. We were very clear about ensuring that people didn't feel pressured to attend. A large number of people chose to come along to the information session and decided they wanted to join Adam's circle.

All circles work differently. In our group, we develop an agenda at the start of each meeting. This reduces the need for pre-meeting preparation. We want a great life for Adam, not more work for us and this approach works.

The meetings are usually facilitated by the same person. Of course, not all circles are this formal – they can be as simple as sitting around having a coffee and chat with people who care about the person in the centre.

Our circle meetings are held in our house on Sunday evenings and usually run for less than two hours. Adam doesn't usually participate but is always keen to say hello to the people who attend. It's been a positive experience for everyone to have the chance to spend time with him and is also a good opportunity for us to socialise with each other over refreshments and snacks.

Currently, there are about twelve members in the circle, including a former paid support worker who now voluntarily participates.

One of the major successes of Adam's circle has been the involvement of his cousins who are his age. These were people who potentially could have drifted apart from him as they became

young adults. Instead, their participation in the circle has helped them continue to be active and involved in his life.

Another great success of the circle has been the development of a roster of social events for Adam to attend. Circle members decided that they wanted a roster where they could plan to spend time with Adam on weekends. Initially, I resisted this idea, fearing that the roster would come to be seen as an obligation or duty, which was exactly what we didn't want for our son. The circle members persisted, insisting that they genuinely wanted to spend more time with Adam and that planning in advance helped them juggle their own family commitments. Thankfully, they prevailed and Adam now gets to spend a great deal of time with the circle members. I doubt that these opportunities would have developed without the circle.

Adam is passionate about the outdoors. He is a volunteer with Bush Care Regeneration and has also volunteered with the Council Clean Up team. The circle has been considering other possibilities to supplement his outdoor interests and has recently been working on finding him an office role for one day each week. Members of the circle have recently helped make an advertisement offering his services, as well as making calls and sending emails. While nothing has come of these efforts as yet, we are hopeful that something will soon come up.

In the past, Adam had a paper delivery run during which he was assisted by either a paid support worker or circle members. He really enjoyed this and it's something we are looking at for the future.

The circle is also giving us the confidence and the mental space to think about the bigger picture. Last year we held a five year planning meeting. This involved exploring the idea of Adam moving out of home. This is a daunting thought for any parent and it's been wonderful to have other people offer to help consider this possibility.

I'm glad that Adam's circle began while he was still at school – I only wish we had started it sooner. He's now more connected with his extended family, including those relatives his own age. We have a group of people who gather together to work out ways to make his life better and plan for the future. We're still working at it, but the circle helps us on this journey.



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