

Strengthening Connections – Part 2

By Di Samuels

It's been more than eighteen months since we started the circle of support for Rhiannon and she is now eight. We had generated a lot of community support about the idea but soon realised that we needed a smaller group of people to meet more regularly, as the circle, to help with the thinking and planning about possibilities for Rhiannon's life.

We have had larger group planning days when we invited the community to help us to dream and imagine opportunities for Rhiannon. Sometimes we have had forty to sixty people at these days, which have become an annual event. On the planning days, we formulate some goals for the year that help the whole family pursue interests and grow personally. In between annual planning days, Rhiannon's circle of twelve people meets to work out ways to make her goals a reality.

One of the goals for Rhiannon was to give her the opportunity to have an extracurricular experience she would enjoy and develop skills around. Rhiannon enjoys physical pursuits, particularly swimming. I appreciated the support of the circle to get this up and going again. It takes more time and effort for me to get moving around such things because the nearest pool is an hour away on a dirt bush road. The circle was also there to help me let go of this idea when it clearly wasn't working. I may have tried to persevere with this long after it was useful.

They helped me rethink and keep motivated about what else we could try. Someone from the circle offered to find out if Rhiannon could join gym classes in the same town as the pool. Some circle members also volunteered to come with me and check the situation. I really appreciated the moral support because sometimes a lot of stuff seems so hard and even impossible. The gym, however, has proved a great success. The manager welcomed Rhiannon and saw no reason why she couldn't join with the other kids. She fits in well with the class and her ability to work with others has really grown. She no longer needs my support in the classes, which is great because I take the opportunity to go shopping as this town has our closest shops. Later, I drop Rhiannon's brothers at soccer practice and she comes along to watch, as well as get to meet the other families associated with this sport.

The circle helps me to see that the challenges coming up are not mountains but molehills, especially when they help me break it down into doable steps. People in the circle offer support in other ways that is often a natural extension of things they would typically do. Some have organised trips to the coast from time to time so that the kids can swim and, this way, Rhiannon

still gets to practise the skill. This is wonderful because I don't have the time to run a business and facilitate all the great experiences I want my children to have. I am a busy person but starting a circle and reaching out to the wider community is worth the effort, on top of everything else, because it multiplies opportunities for Rhiannon that I didn't even imagine could happen.

For example, a lady from our community who has come to the community planning days had the opportunity to make a contribution that she knew both she and Rhiannon would enjoy. When she understood that we were looking at ways for Rhiannon to get connected to other kids in the community, this lady offered to have six tea-parties for Rhiannon at her home with some other children. Rhiannon loved the parties and all the children were so pleased to have an invitation just for them. Rhiannon has had other visits with this lady since the tea-parties ended. It is wonderful to see this friendship grow and Rhiannon just adores her.

Having the circle for Rhiannon has helped my family feel more connected to our community. It is a close community but we felt we had drifted away a bit because it was getting too hard and exhausting to try to keep ourselves and Rhiannon involved. With the circle's support I am now no longer the only one who has to have all the ideas. It is so good to have help with the thinking and planning and to be buoyed by the circle members' motivation when I feel that there isn't anything more I can possibly do myself. My goal was to get more connected to the people that lived closest to us and the circle is certainly achieving this.

The great thing about the annual planning days is that it has helped people who live further away be more involved. My sister and brother-in-law attend these annual camp weekends from interstate. I think it is important for Rhiannon's future that people beyond her immediate family know what our dreams and aspirations are for her life. They now have a sense of the goals we are establishing for her and the life we want her to have that reflects her uniqueness and gift to the world. This sort of connectedness will keep Rhiannon safe in the future, too, because it's not just our family looking out for her but others in her extended family and community that know we want her to have an inclusive life.

It wasn't easy for our family to open our lives up to others in this way. For me, personally, I would prefer to hide away. I knew, however, that Rhiannon could not possibly have a life full of the typical experiences of children her age unless I got others involved to help us think through how to make these things possible.



W: www.resourcingfamilies.org.au

P: 9869 7753 or 1800 774 764 (free call outside metro areas)

E: info@resourcingfamilies.org.au