

## **Strengthening Connections: A Community Rich with Possibility**

Di Samuels

I first heard about circles of support at a workshop when Rhiannon was really young. She was only just two.

I found the workshop confronting – maybe because a lot of what was being discussed related to older children and people with disability – like leaving school and possible living arrangements. It felt too far ahead.

It also sounded very businesslike – in terms of having meetings and recording progress. I felt that I couldn't facilitate this: we were already doing many different things.

Unsurprisingly, I didn't do anything about starting a circle of support at this stage. I kept learning more and developed some networks with other families who had young children. I also thought about the fact that we already had a terrific community network that supported us. This felt safe for a while.

I continued attending events and going to workshops and all the pieces started to come together.

I realised that Rhiannon had a range of needs and we wanted her to have the same opportunities as our other children. As much as it could be uncomfortable asking for help – I felt it would be selfish not to invite others into her life.

My partner and I attended a particular workshop about planning for the future a couple of years ago and it has been in our minds since then that it would be useful to take steps towards a more directed network.

We're not rushing the process.

We started by hosting a lunch. We invited everyone we could think of. About 70 people came – about half were kids.

We shared Rhiannon's story. We talked about her as a little girl in the context of her family. Our other kids talked about being her brother and her sister.

A facilitator hosted the day. She led a discussion about Rhiannon's gifts and people contributed their thoughts. She talked about the fact that many people with disability are vulnerable to

living isolated lives – that many people with disability only have family and paid people in their life. The facilitator also talked about what a circle of support is and why they can be helpful.

We left it at that.

People felt really good about the day. Not only did they think about Rhiannon but they reflected on their own lives and networks. People cried – in a good way. They were moved by the nature of the community coming together.



We want to build from that day to get some play dates happening with other kids.

Our next step towards a circle will be a weekend away. We have hired a venue on the coast and invited anyone who attended the first day and anyone who said that they would have liked to be there. My sister and brother-in-law are coming across from Adelaide.

There will be an element of socialising and there will also be a facilitated shaping of our vision for Rhiannon's future.

We will be sharing more of what we hope to achieve. We have goals but it will be helpful to hear the contributions of others.

We think that this process will help us refine our thinking about who could be part of a smaller circle next year. We expect that after these two low key events, we will have a clearer idea of the people who will share our vision of supporting Rhiannon to build a great life for her.



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