

A high-angle, top-down photograph of a diverse group of young people, likely students, gathered in a circle. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. Their arms are extended towards the center, and their hands are clasped together in a supportive gesture. The background is bright and slightly blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is positive and collaborative.

# Circles of Support

A manual for getting started



# resourcing inclusive communities

An initiative of Family Advocacy

Resourcing Inclusive Communities is an initiative of Family Advocacy that provides information and resources for families of people with developmental disability in NSW about developing a positive vision for the future, building support networks, creating valued lives in the community and self directing individualised supports.

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Family Advocacy is an independent NSW advocacy organisation that works with families to promote and defend the rights and interests of people with developmental disability.

[www.family-advocacy.com](http://www.family-advocacy.com)

Resourcing Inclusive Communities would like to thank the people who have contributed ideas and shared experiences that have helped create this manual.

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## **Circles of support - what are they?**

A circle of support involves a group of people coming together to help formulate, promote and support the goals of a person with disability. The circle acts as a community of friendship and support around the person at the centre. It is a means of providing practical advice, solving problems and generating creative ideas to contribute positively to the person's life.

Circles of support can be known by other names, such as networks of support or a circle of friends. The name doesn't matter but in this manual a circle of support refers to people gathering in a voluntary and intentional way to progress the interests of an individual person with disability.

Circles of support are based on an understanding of the importance of relationships in our life and the need for strong support networks. This is especially important for someone who might be vulnerable because of disability. Many of us have friends or informal networks that we rely on when we need advice, when we are in crisis and when we want to share our triumphs. For many people with disability, these typical connections may not exist automatically and need facilitation.

The people who participate in the circle, how often they come together, the topics that are discussed and the formality of the meetings can vary between circles of support but they are all made up of people who care about the person and want to actively grow his or her life opportunities.

## **Are circles of support a new idea?**

It is believed that the idea for a circle of support started in Canada in the early 1980s. Judith Snow found herself trapped in an extremely restricted life in an institution in Canada because her disability meant that she was unable to perform most personal tasks without assistance. A circle of friends helped her plan and instigate an independent life in which she left the institution, moved into her own home, completed tertiary education and began her professional career as writer, speaker and advocate. From that time other circles of support started to form and eventually the concept spread to other parts of the world. A quick internet search will show circles operating in Canada, the UK, United States, New Zealand and Australia.

It is difficult to know how many circles of support exist. Some circles are facilitated by formal organisations but others are private arrangements between families and their friends. There is certainly no need to wait for an organisation to start a circle. Many circles are simply made up of everyday people who have decided that it's a good idea and get a circle going.



## How can they be useful?

Some key reasons to start a circle include to:

- build a community of support around the person at the centre of the circle
- involve others in the thinking and planning for the present and future
- engage people in imagining better for someone's life
- multiply ideas, resources and networks
- encourage opportunities for people to contribute
- have a group of people to look out for a person's best interests
- assist the person to grow in confidence and promote their own interests.

People with disability are often at risk of becoming isolated and surrounded by people who are paid to be in their life (Chernets, G. as cited in Ward, J, 2010). Circles of support can be a strategy for connecting everyday people to a person with disability in freely given ways. Circles can also help keep a person safe by having a good number of people close enough to speak up on the person's behalf and watch that their life is meaningful and secure in the present and future.

*"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" - Jennie*

*"{Our Circle of Support} listens to our concerns and fears, presents suggestions from outside the box, celebrates some fantastic events in Matt's life, and they keep things running when I go away. It's amazing how Matt has grown in confidence since we started the 'Mattpac'. He is now living alone...and calling the shots in his own life!" - Carmel*



## Research into the benefits of circles

- They bring together people who care about the person and have different skills to those of the family (Burke, C. 2006).
- They nurture relationships and offer opportunities to develop real friendships.
- They focus on the person as an individual with gifts and capacities – someone with their own views and beliefs, with a right to self-determination and a lot to offer the community.
- They help people to build dreams and identify what needs to be done to make these happen.
- They assist with planning by bringing together fresh ideas, perspectives and skills.
- They help develop an action plan of how positive change will be achieved (Burke, C. 2006).
- They act as a safeguard for the future. ‘They can become a forum for commitment and security – people who know and care will be there over time to make sure the individual is supported and safe’ (Chernets, G. as cited in Ward, J. 2010).
- They help extended family members and friends understand what’s involved in providing support for the person and therefore better help with succession planning.
- They can ‘provide companionship, relationships, fun and celebration’ (Chernets, G. as cited in, Ward, J. 2010).

*“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 to offer to help consider the possibility”*

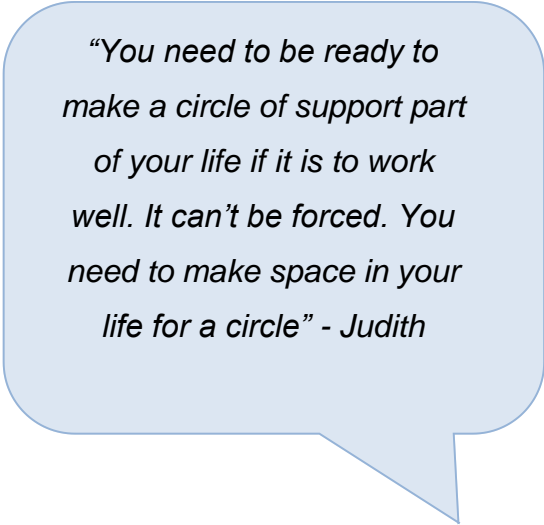
*- Karen*

## What are the limits of a circle?

Part of understanding what circles are is being clear about what they are not.

Circles cannot:

- replace the role of the family in a person's life
- take on the role of services in a person's life
- take care of the person at the centre of the circle on a daily basis
- be involved with everything about the life of the person
- be centred on supports for parents or carers.



*“You need to be ready to make a circle of support part of your life if it is to work well. It can't be forced. You need to make space in your life for a circle” - Judith*

The last point is important to remember so that circles don't lose their prime focus which is to support the individual with disability. Parents often feel supported, however, when they see the circle assisting their family member to have a better life.

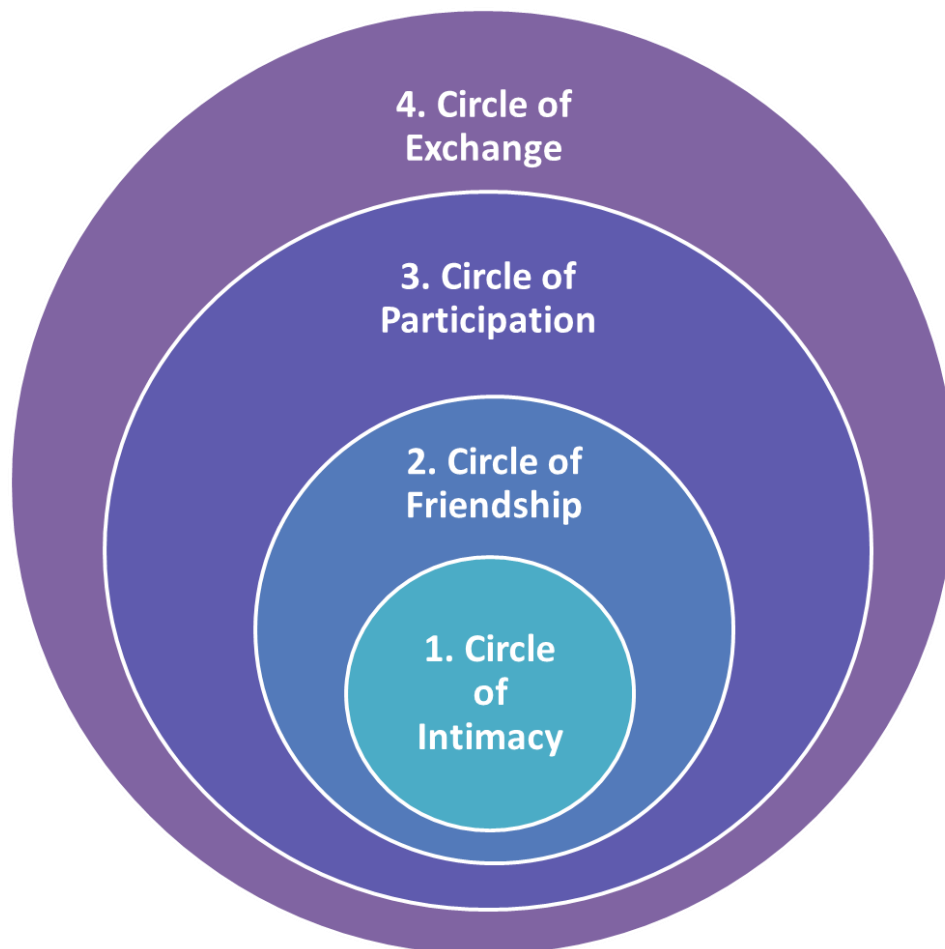
Circles are also not the magic answer that will address all the issues in the life of your family member. It is important to have realistic expectations. This means that you may choose not to bring some of the issues or circumstances of your family member's life to the circle for discussion, allowing them to remain private and within the family.

Always be mindful that change in people's lives takes time and some human dilemmas are complex so there may be no quick fixes. There may also be setbacks but the advantage of a circle is the opportunity to go back to the drawing board and start with another idea. Circles provide an opportunity to develop and improve the life of a person with disability and their family; the opportunity is valuable and cannot be hurried (Richards, S. 2007).



## Circles of relationships

Judith Snow (1998) describes 4 different circles of relationships that exist within our lives.



**Circle One: The “CIRCLE OF INTIMACY”** includes those closest to us. These are people that are so important to us that their absence would have a significant impact. They could be family members or very close friends.

**Circle Two: The “CIRCLE OF FRIENDSHIP”** consists of people who are friends or relatives with whom we could share a movie or go out for dinner but are not those who we consider our most dear friends or those we must see regularly.

**Circle Three: The “CIRCLE OF PARTICIPATION”** includes the people, organisations or associations we participate with in life. This could be at work, school, clubs, sporting teams, interest groups, anywhere we interact with people. Some of the people in Circle 3 may later be in Circle 1 or 2 if a relationship develops. Circle 3 is characterised as “the garden for sowing future relationships”.

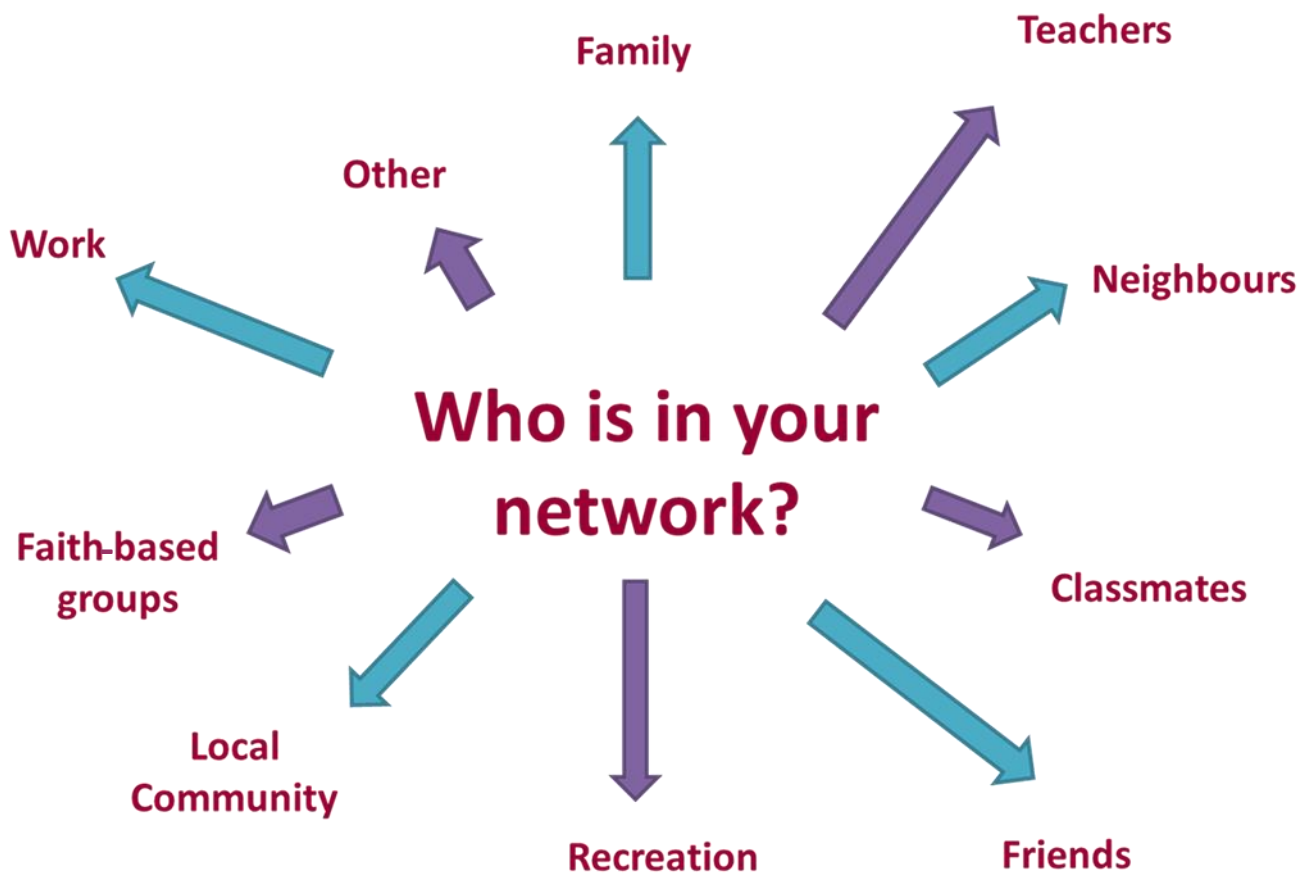
**Circle Four: The “CIRCLE OF EXCHANGE”** is made up of paid people – those that are in our lives because they are paid to be. This could include people like doctors, teachers, dentists, social workers, therapists, hairdressers, car mechanics and tradespeople (Davis, K., 2005).

Many people have relationships across the four circles and have active lives that enable more and more people to move into their circles of relationships and perhaps towards their circle of intimacy. A person with disability may be vulnerable to having only a few people in some of the circles. For example, they may have close relationships with their immediate family in the circle of intimacy but no real friendships. They may also be isolated from their community and have no connections in the circle of participation. The circle of exchange, however, can be heavily populated by paid staff and service workers (Davis, K., 2005).

Circles of support are one tool for attempting to think through ways of addressing this imbalance. Firstly, the circle itself brings people closer into circles of friendship and intimacy. Secondly, the circle can actively plan for how to bring more people into a person’s life, particularly through developing the circle of participation that may eventually result in people moving into the circle of friendship.

## Who should I ask to be part of a circle?

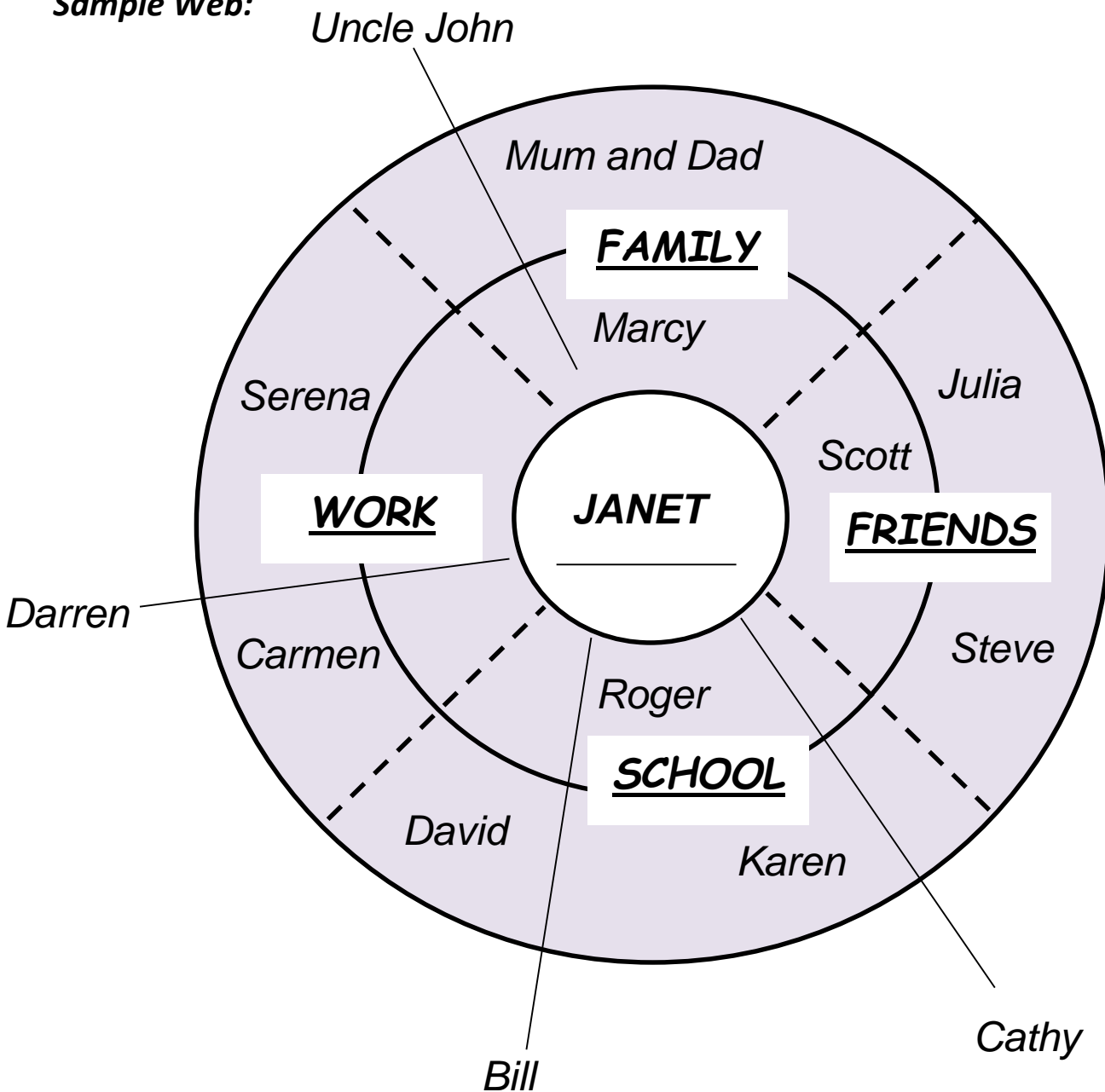
Anyone connected to the person and who shows a genuine interest in their wellbeing can potentially be involved. Family, friends, neighbours or members of a club or association your family member attends are possible people to invite into the circle. It is also important that the person at the centre of the circle is involved in deciding who will be invited to be part of his or her circle. Consider your current networks and who might be a good person to ask.



It is very important that people of a similar age or generation to your family member are invited into the circle. Firstly, they will know how best to encourage friendships with people their age and how your family member can pursue age appropriate interests. Secondly, they are young enough to still be in your family member's life when you are no longer around. Thinking about the future and succession planning is an important way of keeping people safe.

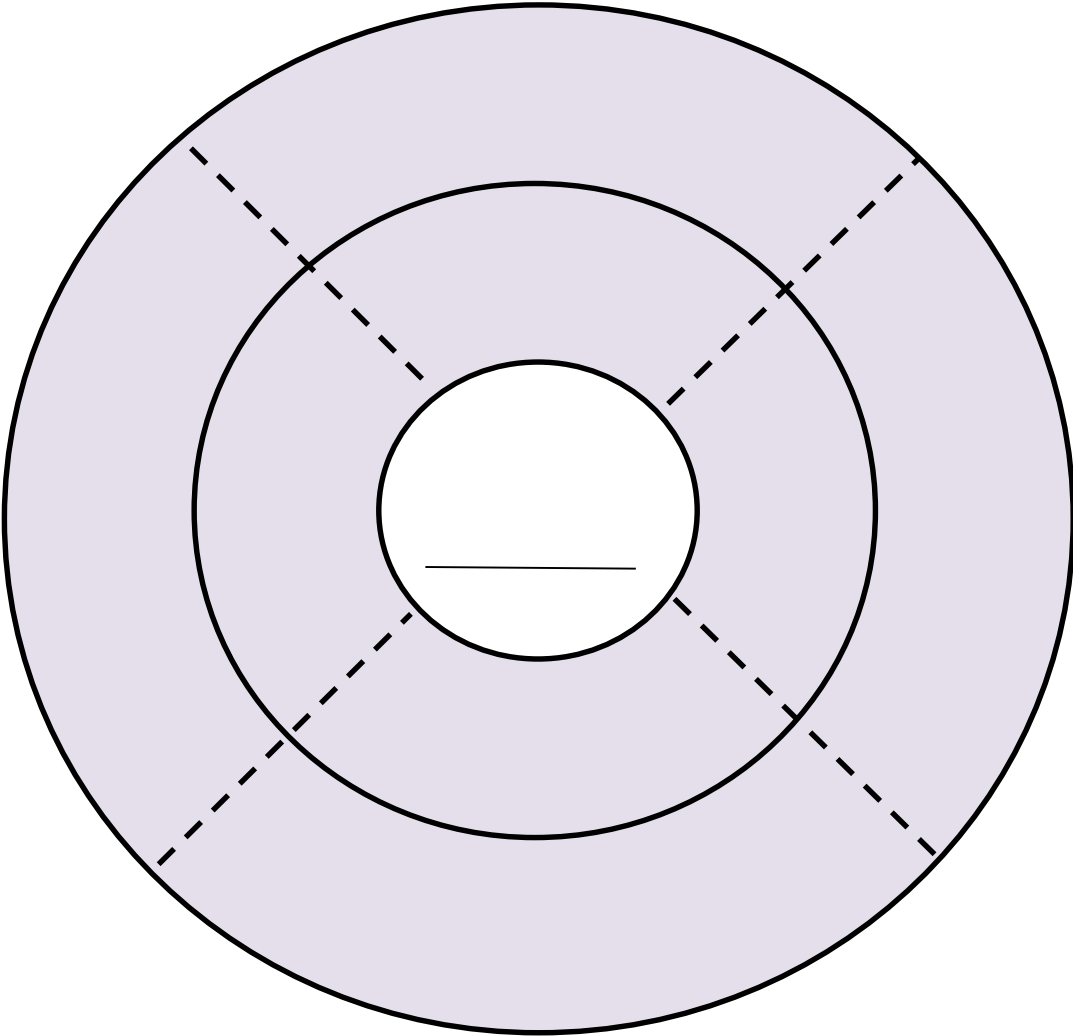
In the diagram below, the person with disability is at the centre of the circle and the people around them are those who currently sit in their network. The idea is that the people closest to the centre of the web are those closest to the person. Uncle John may be out there in the periphery right now but he could be encouraged to develop a closer connection and be more involved. It is always good to think of people who had a role in the past or took an interest in your family member's life. Could they be invited to take on a new role and renew their connection by being part of the circle?

**Sample Web:**



You may like to take some time with this blank web below to think through who your family member is connected to. You can divide up the web according to your own life areas like friends, family and work and add others if you wish. If you discover some gaps in the web these could be the areas where you may need to work on building and strengthening connections.

***Your Family Member's Web:***



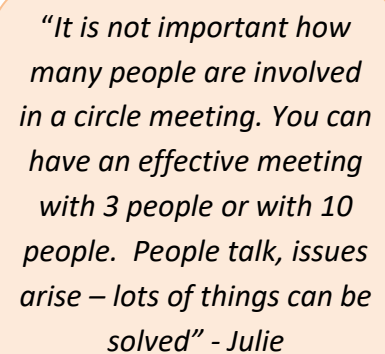
## Should paid staff – such as support staff - be included in the circle?

Circles of support are voluntary by their nature and so if a paid support person is attending then it should be in a voluntary capacity like everyone else. You may also need to be mindful that the mere presence of a paid professional may inhibit other circle members sharing their ideas. They may feel there is an “expert” in the room and that his or her ideas are more valid, so make sure everyone feels that their opinion is equally valued. Former paid staff, have however, been invited into circles because they have had a good connection with the person and want to continue to support the person as a friend through the circle.

## How many people need to be included?

There is no rule, but a circle might have as few as four or five members. Some people have even started with three members, making up what they described as an “arc” of support but with a view to finding more people to join.

The circle has to be manageable because you can have too many people. Choose a number that gives everyone a chance to contribute but not have too many opinions that it becomes difficult to decide good actions.



*“It is not important how many people are involved in a circle meeting. You can have an effective meeting with 3 people or with 10 people. People talk, issues arise – lots of things can be solved” - Julie*

## What if I have nobody to ask?

If you think you have nobody to ask, then you just need to take the first step to building up connections in a person’s life. This may mean also developing your family connections. Look again at the Circle of Relationships diagram and consider ways to build up the circle of participation, so you can start growing a network to draw from.

The Resourcing Inclusive Communities website has ideas for how to develop connections with people in the community: [www.ric.org.au](http://www.ric.org.au).

## How do I ask people to join a circle?

### Afraid to ask?

Asking people to be more involved can be daunting and uncomfortable. It can be hard to invite people into a closer relationship within our lives and we may feel that we are asking too much of people. It is important to remember that you are not asking for yourself but for your family member who needs your help to develop their life opportunities and networks. When you look at it that way can you afford not to ask?

*“I wanted to be more involved in Jessica’s life but was nervous that I can come across as imposing by offering a hand. I was delighted when I was invited to join her circle of support” - Maria*

This is an especially important consideration for families who often wonder who will be there for their family member when they no longer can be. That’s why it is so important to get other people, and especially younger ones involved in the person’s life as soon as you can. You may well be delighted at how interested people are to be involved and how easily people make time for things they consider as really important. Many people enjoy an opportunity to make a positive contribution to someone’s life. Taking this step will come more easily if there is a shift from thinking “I am inviting people to a burdensome task” to “I am inviting people to contribute in a positive way that is valuable to us and could possibly be a mutually beneficial experience”. Whatever the reason for coming (to the circle) people speak positively about the process – how it is a privilege to be asked and how it has changed their own lives and deepened their relationships. People have spoken about changed attitudes, having their understanding enriched, their skills validated and being valued by the family” (Bourke, S. 2009).

*“Just start by making a list of everyone you know and just send a simple invitation to a morning or afternoon tea. Once you sit down and nut it out, it is amazing who is available. Who emerges from this process will surprise you” - Maria*

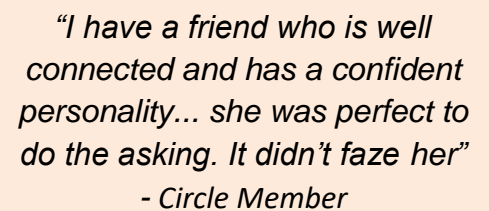


## The Art of asking

Ric Thompson (2005) encourages people to be 'ask prepared' in order that their requests have the best chance of success. Ric works for an organisation in Queensland that supports people to develop networks and connections in community and is acutely aware of the challenges of asking. It is important to be prepared and understand clearly what you are expecting of people so that your request is easily understood. This means you should be able to explain to people why you want to start a circle of support.

## Who will do the asking?

You don't have to do the asking if you think this is too difficult. Choose a person to assist you who will be respected and considered appropriate by people. Make sure the person who does the asking clearly understands what a circle is and can answer people's questions.



*"I have a friend who is well connected and has a confident personality... she was perfect to do the asking. It didn't faze her"*  
- Circle Member

## When do you ask?

When and where you ask also has an impact on whether your request is successful or not. Even with the right person to ask and a clear request a message may be lost if the person is distracted, stressed, in crisis or in an environment where they can't hear or give you their full attention. For example, it is best not to contact people when they are at work.

## Don't be offended if people don't join the circle!

There may be many reasons why a person can't commit to being in a circle, such as their own time commitments. It's important to remember that this is not a personal rejection of you or your family member and to not let this affect the relationship that you already enjoy with them. Keeping the door open could lead to the person joining at a later time.

Be prepared and allow people to say no to safeguard yourself from rejection and ensure that others are not feeling obligated to get involved.

## Written invitations

A written message is sometimes the clearest way to convey your meaning and can follow an initial verbal invitation. Writing things down clarifies your thoughts and enables people to re-read and check the details. It also gives the invitation an added gravitas!

*"If I had to sum up my reaction to this invitation in one word it would be: excitement! The second word would be: flattered. I was so excited and flattered to be invited to share in what seemed to me to be such a positive and inspiring venture. Not surprisingly, I said yes right away"*  
- Nadia

***Dear Friend,***

***We are celebrating Lawrence's end of school life and his new journey.***

***Would you like to share Lawrence's vision?***

***We would like to invite you to afternoon tea at our place on***

***Sunday 6th November, 2011 at 2 pm.***

***This afternoon is about planning and creating opportunities for  
Lawrence's good life.***

***Here we will share his vision. Please join us for this momentous occasion.***

***Love***

***Lawrence and his family***

ADDRESS

29 My Address

My Home

Phone



RSVP

Nelke: Phone numbers

Julia: Phone numbers



You're invited to a community gathering at the  
Local school multipurpose room

on Saturday 14th August

We wish to gather together to talk about Rhiannon's future and explore what can be done now to help ensure that she is safe and happy in the coming years.



We would like to share Rhiannon's story that will allow people to help us plan a brighter future for her. We wish to create opportunities for her to more actively participate in the community. To this end we are hoping to establish a **'Circle of Support'** around Rhiannon and our family. As this is a journey into the future we will be inviting the community at large to share this journey with us if they wish.

We hope you can join us between **9am and 2pm**. AB from ..... will be assisting us to facilitate this day.

All members of the community including children are welcome. We hope it will help people to understand what a circle of support is without any commitment necessary.

Morning tea and lunch will be provided.

In order to plan for catering we would appreciate your expression of interest in attending or any enquiries by **Friday 30<sup>th</sup> July**.

K and D

Phone 1234 5678

[spotbudgie@provider.com.au](mailto:spotbudgie@provider.com.au)

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**You're invited to a gathering at Kate and Scott's house at:**

My Home Address

on Saturday 30th December between 3.30 and 5.30 p.m.

We want to gather some friends and family to talk about Scott's future and explore what can be done now to help ensure that he's safe and happy in the coming years.

On that afternoon we would like to tap into the wisdom of a larger group of people who care about Scott and we would welcome your ideas and energy at this discussion.

We hope you can join us for this gathering and then stay on for a BBQ afterwards. RSVP to Kate on # by 25<sup>th</sup> December.



***Kate and Scott***

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## How to structure meetings

Every circle of support is different and will have a unique culture and structure. There are, however, some basic guidelines that are likely to make circle meetings more successful.

### How often?

Regular meetings are necessary if the circle is going to have time to form, strengthen and gather momentum. Meeting once every six weeks or two to three months are typical timeframes. This means you are not meeting too often so that the process becomes burdensome and not so infrequently that people can't form a connection with each other or get to know the person at the centre of the circle. If people don't have the chance to get to know the person they may not feel confident to suggest possibilities for their life.

### How long?

Circle meetings typically last for about 2 hours. You have to remember that people are volunteering their time and so meetings should never go on and on or past scheduled finishing times. Sticking to set times gives people confidence that their time is being respected and they are more likely to want to continue as circle members. Meetings don't just have to be about business, most are enlivened with good food and social times. Some meetings can of course run a bit longer for specific reasons like planning days or celebrations. One circle set aside a day for developing a five year plan for the person they were assisting.

*"It requires some work and planning and it can be a challenge to find suitable dates when everyone can meet but it is well worth it. You need to be prepared and ready to facilitate discussions. This commitment communicates how important you think the purpose of the meeting is and that influences the other circle members to be committed also"*

*- Teresa*

## Where?

Circles most often take place in people's homes. All that matters is that the setting is comfortable and private, as discussions are about an individual's personal life. Not everyone may be physically present at a meeting, encourage people to join through speakerphone or Skype.

## Involving the person with disability in their circle

The circle is all about the person at the centre, so his or her involvement should be encouraged as much as possible. Often the person becomes more interested to be involved and confident to share their views once he or she sees the circle in action. This should be welcomed because the circle should be actively supporting the individual's growing independence and self-determination. Other people may not wish to join their circle meetings but can be a part of welcoming those who attend and the social and celebratory events that follow. Sometimes it may be necessary to have meetings or discussions without the person present because some issues will be sensitive and may focus on negative circumstances in the person's life. This may mean that the discussion would be distressing for the individual. On this basis some families have suggested to their family member to join them after the circle meeting for the shared meal. Another family scheduled a circle meeting that their family member didn't know about as the entire discussion would have been too overwhelming for her. The next circle meeting their family member joined in as per usual.



## How to run meetings

Circle meetings will need some structure if they are going to be successful. There are some key roles that people can take:

**Chairperson** – leads the meeting and keeps it on track.

**Minute/Note taker** – records discussion points, decisions, any actions to be taken and by whom and sends out the minutes.

**Meeting scheduler** – reminds people of meeting times and forwards information to circle members.

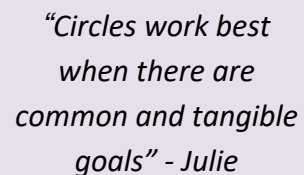
These roles can be performed by different people or be shared and rotated. They don't have to be performed by you or other family members. There are probably circle members who have these skills and would be happy to contribute.

### Do I need a paid facilitator?

No, many circles function effectively without a paid facilitator. The key roles just described can be filled by circle members. Paid facilitation requires funding and may not be long term. Funds could also be spent on paid support that circle members may not be able to offer.

### Setting an agenda

It is good to set an agenda so the meeting has some structure and doesn't go overtime. An agenda can be sent out to people beforehand, so they can come to the meeting prepared with what the discussion is going to be about.



*“Circles work best when there are common and tangible goals” - Julie*



Example agendas:

### **Peter's first circle meeting**

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| 1. Introductions.<br>(How long has each person known Peter and how did they meet?)                                       | 15 minutes |
| 2. Icebreaker - getting to know one another.   | 15 minutes |
| 3. A discussion about circles of support.<br>(What a circle of support is and how it can help Peter have a better life.) | 10 minutes |
| 4. Peter's life: now and as we would like it to be.  | 20 minutes |
| 5. Brainstorming Peter's skills and qualities.   | 20 minutes |
| 6. Discussion of meeting logistics.<br>(Frequency, days, times etc.)   | 5 minutes  |
| 7. Reflection and feedback.  | 5 minutes  |
| 8. Afternoon tea.  |            |

### **Scott's circle of support**

Agenda for meeting on 8 August 2014.

1. Review of notes from last meeting and any issues arising
2. Update on action items
3. Making new community connections – opportunities for Scott
4. Volunteer opportunities for Scott
5. Planning Scott's upcoming birthday party.

If you have any items that you think should be added to the agenda, please call me on ... before this meeting.

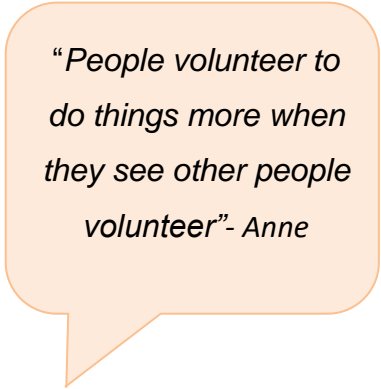
## Taking minutes

It is essential that minutes are taken of the meeting discussions. All discussion points and decisions need to be recorded to check things are progressing. Minutes don't have to be longwinded, bullet points can suffice, as long as it is clear what each meeting is about. Minutes also help people who can't attend keep in touch with what is going on.

You can always take advantage of social media and have a circle Facebook page or website where circle members can stay updated and interact with one another.

## Action items

When decisions are made they can be written as action items with a note to who is to achieve them and by when. This way you will be able to track outcomes and keep the circle accountable to getting things done. Written action items may also encourage people to volunteer once they see that sharing tasks is fairer. Don't be afraid to divide up the responsibilities and delegate because it is all for your family member not just to help you.



*“People volunteer to do things more when they see other people volunteer”- Anne*

Example action table:

Action/task	Who	By when
Find out costs of Matthew attending swimming lessons	Terry	Next circle meeting 16 Jan
Speak with local environmental groups about volunteering opportunities	Louise	In the next month
Take Matthew shopping for his brother's birthday	Peter	Next circle meeting 16 Jan

## Circle business

When you have successfully invited people to be circle members and there is an enthusiastic anticipation to get involved and make things happen, the next step is to think about what to work towards in the circle.

Here are some ideas:

- Write a positive vision for the person's future to inspire your progress.
- Focus on the strengths and good qualities of the person and help build on those.
- Develop a plan for the future that will keep the person safe and secure.
- Identify negative situations in the person's life and work towards positive changes.
- Discover and explore his or her personal interests.
- Consider areas for his or her skill development.
- Plan for a meaningful life after school.
- Plan for moving out of home.
- Develop strategies for the person to make connections with new people.
- Look at the person's weekly schedule and find ways to make it more fulfilling and varied.
- Consider work and/or volunteering opportunities.
- Address obstacles to achieving goals.

*"Be open to ideas: let your imagination run wild when talking about vision and the future" - Teresa*

*"We didn't make it all the way through the agenda on that first meeting but it gave people a very clear idea of the direction and process they would be engaged in. We made it to brainstorming and got a draft vision. More detailed planning was left for future sessions and has now been done" - Margaret*

## Circles for children

Many of the things in the list on the previous page are also applicable for children but here are a few more ideas. Circles are useful for anyone of any age. You just need to think about the age of the person at the centre and what others of the same age might do that are typical of good childhood experiences. Then the circle can plan together how to make those things happen.

For example:

- Find ways to involve extended family and friends in the child's life.
- Brainstorm practical ideas for play dates.
- Plan for transitioning to school.
- Investigate after school interests.
- Develop ideas for joining kids' groups.
- Assist participation in typical childhood experiences, such as sleepovers, birthdays, school excursions, kids' camps and clubs etc.



## Elements of successful circles

Most successful circles have some of the following elements.

- A Long term commitment.
- Awareness that there won't always be quick fixes.
- Creative brainstorming and honesty.
- Time to build trust and learn together.
- Effective use of people's gifts and wisdom.
- A sense of optimism that a problem can be solved.
- People to facilitate the process and take responsibility for the ongoing functioning of the circle.
- A chance to enjoy the experience and have fun together.
- Acceptance of new ideas.
- Being open to change.
- A common dream or vision.
- Accepting failures and seeking other solutions.
- A diverse spread of ages and backgrounds.
- Celebration of the person's achievements.

*"The circle helps me to see that the challenges coming up are not mountains but molehills, especially when they help me break them down into do-able steps. People in the circle offer support in other ways that is often a natural extension of things they would typically do" - Di*

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