

Circles of Support

The fundamental concept of a *circle of support* is quite simple. Most of us have close friends and family who share the everyday moments of our lives. They walk with us through the celebrations, trials, and tribulations that mark major events in our lives. A circle of family and friends becomes a *circle of support*. For the 'focus person,' a circle provides assistance, guidance, relationships, safety, and community.



There may also be family, friends, and acquaintances who have played a significant role in our lives at some point and who could possibly become closer in the future.

Also important, but not as personal, is a network of support made up of paid and unpaid specialists like doctors, lawyers, counselors, club and association members, employers, teachers, coaches, bankers, and religious leaders. These individuals and groups are there for us in our civic life and in times when we need specialized support.

The life of a well-connected adult with an active civic life can include relationships with several hundred individuals. However, across the United States and in Texas, people with substantial disabilities lose the opportunity to develop circles of support when isolated in restrictive educational or residential settings. Social networks of people excluded from typical community life can be limited to family and paid service providers. As a result, the rich texture of close friends and family who provide substantial assistance and protection to the vulnerable person will not develop.

Person-Centered Planning and Circles of Support

Over the last thirty years, *person-centered planning* has evolved as a significant tool to empower people with disabilities to receive the proper supports to develop a life based on his or her specific dreams and aspirations.

Defining Circles of Support

The circle of support is a group of “people who care about change happening for the focus person and choose to give their time and resources to working for change. They see themselves as an action oriented group that exists with and for the person, commit themselves to working alongside the focus person and meeting from time to time for as long as it takes to assure that the person has a secure and interesting community life. The more diverse the group’s skills and connections the more they can get done. The better they are able to listen and see things from the focus person’s point of view, the more the focus person will be strengthened by their support.” (Mount, 2002)

The *circle of support* concept is fundamental to all of the person-centered planning models. Advocates utilize these tools to assist people with significant support needs to study in ordinary schools, work at real jobs, live safely in their own homes and become fully participating members of their community. The importance of the *circle of support* is highlights the success or failure of *person-centered plan*. Successful plans tend to be based on the circle’s viability in functioning independently and zealously on behalf of the focus person.

Designing Intentional Circles of Support

Each focus person, community, and potential circle of support is unique by definition. Communities that have already gone through significant change to welcome people with significant support needs, demonstrate a better understanding of the steps required to create a circle. In other communities where little or no change

has occurred, more time will be needed to establish the support for a circle to be sustained.

There is no simple formula to create an intentional circle of support. Some benchmarks, however, can be used. The circle of support is a natural network that is not owned or controlled by any agency or service. This network might be described as a form of augmented community. As Mount (2002) and others have noted, this implies that several roles are critical to an effective circle of support, especially as it relates to the person-centered planning process.

- A committed champion (hopefully more) must take direction from the focus person and act in his or her best interest. Without this person, the circle will not be able to develop a life of its own.
- A community builder – one who intimately knows the local community and how to tap its key players. The work of John McKnight on asset-based community development has provided people with the tools to analyze and to act for change using the language of community. The community builder uses the network of relationships within the community to stimulate positive change.
- A skilled facilitator - especially if intense person-centered planning is undertaken. Vibrant circles of support then invite other members who can commit to working for positive change in their community. As a circle develops a life of its own, the need for outside facilitation diminishes as members naturally take on critical aspects of this role.

Finally, an agency committed to change, while not essential to the circle of support, can be critical to the life of the focus person. This agency can help in implementing instrumental aspects of the person-centered plan and in illustrating the positive role that services can and should play in our communities. As you explore the resources cited below, you will see that many other roles are possible. Those listed above, however, are most critical to the intentional circle of support.

Learning more about Circles of Support

Over the last thirty years, a considerable collection of work illustrates the contribution of circles of support to create strong and vibrant communities where everyone belongs and is valued. The resources listed here provide navigation tools for creating positive social change through the development of stronger communities. Each provides a unique look into the many facets of intentional circles of support.

Green, Mike, Henry Moore, and John O'Brien, forward by John McKnight. [ABCD in Action: When People Care Enough to Act, Asset Based Community Development.](http://www.inclusion.com/bkwhenpeople.html) Inclusion: Toronto, 2006.
 Available from Inclusion Press: <http://www.inclusion.com/bkwhenpeople.html>

Mount, Beth, John O'Brien, and Connie Lyle O'Brien. [Increasing the Chances for Deeper Change Through Person-Centered Planning.](http://thechp.syr.edu/rsapub.htm) Responsive Systems Associates: 2002.
 Available on the internet from the Center on Human Policy at Syracuse University: <http://thechp.syr.edu/rsapub.htm>

O'Brien, John, and Connie Lyle O'Brien. [Members of Each Other: Building Community in Company With People With Developmental Disabilities.](http://www.inclusion.com/bkmembersofeachother.html) Inclusion: Toronto, 1996.
 Available from Inclusion Press: <http://www.inclusion.com/bkmembersofeachother.html>

Pearpoint, Jack, John O'Brien, and Martha Forest. [PATH: A Workbook for Planning Positive Possible Futures.](http://www.inclusion.com/bkpathworkbook.html) 2nd ed. Inclusion: Toronto, 2001.
 Available from Inclusion Press: <http://www.inclusion.com/bkpathworkbook.html>

Pearpoint, Jack, [From Behind the Piano: Building Judith Snow's Unique Circle of Friends, & Snow, Judith. What's Really Worth Doing And How to Do It: A book for People Who Love Someone Labeled Disabled](http://www.inclusion.com/bkfrombehindthepiano.html) (double book). Inclusion: Toronto, 2007.
 Available from Inclusion Press: <http://www.inclusion.com/bkfrombehindthepiano.html>

Perske, Robert, and Martha Perske. [Circles of Friends: People with Disabilities and Their Friends Enrich the Lives of One Another,](http://www.inclusion.com/bkcirclesoffriends.html) Abingdon: Nashville, 1988.
 Available from Inclusion Press: <http://www.inclusion.com/bkcirclesoffriends.html>