

# A guide to Circles of Support

By Deb Rouget and Teresa Micallef

This article is an edited extract from 'A Guide to Circles of Support' being published by Belonging Matters.

Many people with a disability, with the support of their families have taken great strides to improve social inclusion and access to their community but often this task depends on one or two key family members. This creates a significant concern about what will happen when these family members are no longer able to provide support in the future. Circles of Support are one of the ways people with disability can safeguard their vision and support in the future but also foster a full, meaningful and inclusive life by including others on the journey.

## What is a Circle of Support?

Circles of Support originated in Canada over 25 years ago and since then have been used extensively in many countries as a practice to *intentionally* invite people to come together in friendship and support of a person with a disability. Circles of Support harness the knowledge and connections of community members rather than viewing the person as a service recipient and encourage a person with a disability

to move from the passive role of client to valued friend, contributor, citizen and creator of their own solutions (Barrett, 2008).

Circles of Support are not a service, professional team meeting, program, social gathering or once off meeting but rather a *voluntary* group of people who are committed to assisting a person with disability to achieve their goals and protect or safeguard their interests into the future (Ellis, 2015).

## Why are Circles of Support important?

Often people with a disability have few unpaid connections other than family. This can leave people particularly vulnerable, lonely, isolated and dependent on paid services and funding. For many people with disability, these typical connections may not exist automatically and need facilitation (Community Living Project, 2019).

Circles of Support can also assist with sharing knowledge and information and can be particularly useful for people self-directing their supports.



● Deb's circle of support

## Benefits of Circles of Support

Each year we ask Circle members to complete a survey. Following are some of the benefits described by Circle members:

- ‘They support [the focus person] to manifest his dreams and celebrate his successes. They care about him and each other and have built a strong sense of friendship and love’
- ‘I got my goal of moving out’
- ‘The planning and clear sense of direction’
- ‘The positive energy, encouragement and acceptance’
- ‘Some great outcomes’
- ‘Excited about planning my future’
- ‘Bringing ideas together from all walks of life’
- ‘Culture of support, challenge, growth and friendship’
- ‘The member’s enthusiasm to assist with ideas’ (Belonging Matters, 2017 & 2018)

Other benefits of having a Circle of Support include a reconnection and deeper relationships with family members, expanded social and economic opportunities and access to an immediate support structure e.g. in times of crisis.

## What are some of the outcomes?

Following are a few outcomes and achievements of those we have journeyed with:

- ‘Living in my own place and finding a housemate’
- ‘Studying Certificate 3 in Music at TAFE’
- ‘Starting own business [card making]’
- ‘Taking more responsibility for banking and bills’
- ‘An increase in independence e.g. shopping, cooking, cleaning and managing money’
- ‘Volunteering at the MCG and Grand Prix’
- ‘Holding a *Meet the Neighbours and Pamper Night*’
- ‘Getting a job in a restaurant’
- ‘Receiving award wages for my work’

## Some tips on getting started!

### 1. Is a Circle of Support the right idea for me?

‘Circles of Support are far from perfect. They are not a magic fix-all solution. They are made up of human beings and therefore messy’ (Rodgers and Rallings, 2016, p12). They’re neither a fad or quick solution and due to their organic nature need tender loving care!

### 2. Purpose of my Circle

What you would like your Circle to assist with? Some people have specifically set up a Circle of Support to help them at school, explore employment options, create a business, move into their own home or increase their opportunities in their community.

### 3. Vision of my Circle

Before you start, imagine your Circle working *really well*. What would it look and feel like? Go beyond what you think is possible.

### 4. Qualities of potential Circle members

You can make a list of the values, qualities, skills, assets, knowledge and connections you would like members to have. It is important that the people match your vision and purpose and extend beyond your immediate family e.g. extended family, friends, neighbours or people in the community from places of shared interest.

### 5. What is the Commitment for members?

For example, where will meetings be held, when, how often, time duration and what will members need to commit to outside of meetings? We have found a two-hour meeting, every two months is very doable for people.

### 6. Asking people

Often this is the biggest hurdle! Getting the vision, qualities and commitment clear helps you to decide *who* to invite. When asking, be clear about your purpose and what you’re asking for (Thompson, 2005). We have found that most people are honoured to be part of a Circle of Support. Our periodical ‘**Thinking About the Art of Asking**’ has many more tips on asking!

## Tips for meetings

The following are just some tips and advice we have learnt along the way.

1. Choose the right venue and time.
2. Define your vision, purpose and values with the Circle in the first meeting/s if possible.
3. Start and finish on time and keep the focus.
4. Build relationships and make it fun and a good experience for everyone.

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5. Make sure all members are included and feel they have a role to play, especially the focus person. This might mean thinking about augmentative communication, using photos etc.
6. Make the most of people in the room who have particular skills or knowledge!
7. Use creative ways to run meetings
8. Ensure all ideas, points and actions are noted and assigned to a member, preferably not all to the person or parents! Review actions at the next meeting and celebrate achievements.
9. Create a succession plan. As much as we would like Circle members to stay forever, this is not reality.

### Why have a facilitator?

Although an independent facilitator is not vital, Circles have found a facilitator useful for people with intellectual or complex disability or when families are facing difficult times. A facilitator can make sure all members are heard, add structure and focus to the meetings, keep the meeting on track and help expand the thinking and scope of ideas. Having an experienced facilitator also ensures that all of the tasks don't fall

to one person predominantly, it is easier for them to delegate tasks to others in the group and keeps people accountable for their actions.

### Conclusion

Circles of Support may not suit everyone but as Margaret Mead said 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'.

To find out more information about Circles of Supports contact Belonging Matters.

Email: [facilitator@belongingmatters.org](mailto:facilitator@belongingmatters.org)

Web: <https://www.belongingmatters.org/>

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### References

Available on request

*Deb is the CEO of Belonging Matters and Teresa currently manages Building Community Networks (BCN), a service provided by Belonging Matters. BCN aims to assist people who have a disability to create and maintain Circles of Support. Both Deb and Teresa facilitate Circles of Support and provide training and mentoring.*

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# What are microboards?

By Jaquie Mills

Jaquie Mills is the managing director of Microboards Australia. She was inspired develop microboards in Australia when her then 15-year-old son Eli, who has Angelman syndrome, was due to leave school and she discovered there were inadequate services available to support him. Eli is now 28 and his microboard Blazing Condor Soul Explosion (Inc.) celebrated its tenth year this year. Jaquie was a finalist in the West Australian of the Year Awards in 2018 for her work. She tells us more here:

A microboard ('small board') is a group of 5-10 people who know a person with disability well, care about them, and who incorporate to become a not-for-profit association which supports just that one person.

Microboards first came about in Manitoba, Canada, more than 30 years ago as a way to get individualised funding for people leaving institutions to live in their own homes in the community. The model is based on the Circle of Support concept which gathers family, friends and community around individuals with disability to meet regularly for the purpose of helping the person to plan the life they want to have, problem solve as issues arise, be socially included and be safe. The main difference is that microboards incorporate and have formal roles like any other board including Chair, Secretary, Treasurer etc, and also have a legally binding constitution which outlines the purpose and rules for how the board operates.





Incorporating circles of support to form microboards may seem like an odd thing to do, but there are some clear benefits. First, as small organisations, microboards can be employers of staff and offer an alternative for people managing their own NDIS funding which doesn't depend on parents to do the work of recruiting, managing staff, payroll etc. Microboards can continue in this role after parents are no longer able to, maintaining the stability of self-managed NDIS packages.

Second, it seems that making a formal commitment improves the sustainability of the network. The first microboards are still going today, more than 30 years after forming, and many continue to support individuals in the years after their parents have passed away. The legal requirements of keeping minutes, having Annual General Meetings and making sure the number of people on the board doesn't fall below a certain number seems to help to maintain the integrity of the model.

Where my life as the parent of a child with a disability had become more isolated over time, this way of thinking said that the community not only should be more engaged in the support of its more vulnerable members, but that it also wants and needs to. There are many hundreds of circles around the world and now more than 1300 microboards in British Columbia.

Microboards can do a wide range of things but the primary aim is to have a group of people who know the person with a disability very well, care about

them and who together can advocate and provide a think tank to help them to plan and problem solve.

As parents, this is the role we have valued the most – having this committed group of people who meet regularly to focus on our son's well-being. If two heads are better than one, eight heads are better than two! Eli's microboard have supported him and us through the transition from school to adult life, from living with us to having his own place, with ideas and innovations when we don't have the energy to be creative and are there when things get tough as well as to celebrate achievements.

We've learned that microboards work well when based on the principles and practice of Vela Microboards Canada who, led by Linda Perry, have been supporting microboards for three decades. The incorporation part is relatively easy, but the process of setting up a microboard can be complex and it's important to have well informed support to create a strong and enduring board with a healthy culture and commitment to safeguard the person in the years to come.

Many families have been able to use their NDIS funding to get help to set up microboards. To find out more about the microboard model from Vela Microboards Canada <http://velacanada.org>, and Microboards Australia here: <http://microboard.org.au/>

*Image: Blazing Condor Soul Explosions (Inc) first meeting with Eli in 2009. Baby Eddie is now 10, and an active participant in board meetings!*