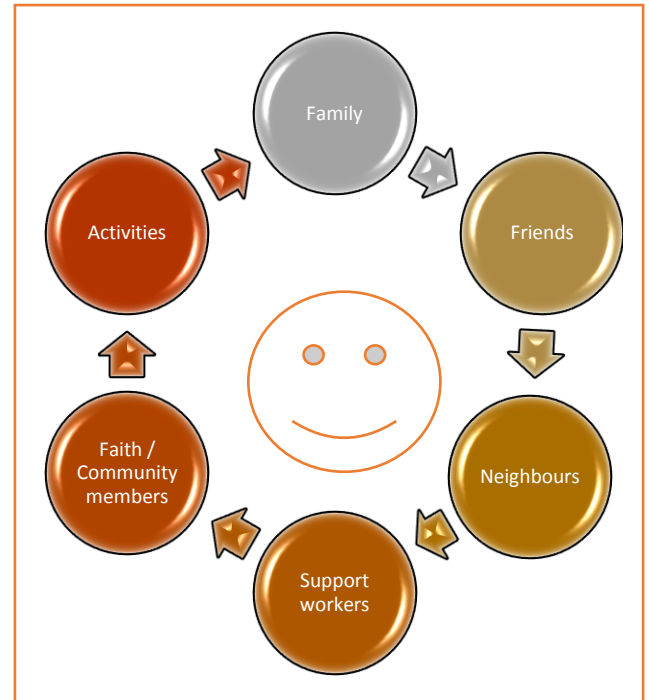


# Circles of Support

A how to guide  
To help you develop  
your circle



A Circle of Support is a group of people who come together voluntarily and intentionally to help promote and progress the goals and interests of one person. For Sutton Mencap that person may have a learning disability, Autism or Asperger's.

- Circles of Support help consider possibilities
- Circles of Support make time and space for thinking, planning and dreaming
- Circles of Support are all about the focus person

Members of Circles, how often they meet, and the issues they talk about vary widely, because all circles are as unique as their focus person.

## Why are they useful?

Circles are a natural part of life for most of us. When we are troubled we call on our family and friends to share our worries and again, when good things happen to share our joy.

We also find our own circles useful to help us think through what we can do and achieve, our dreams, hopes and plans for the future.

Circles naturally support individuals to become better connected in the community and through their connections help to make lasting friendships and relationships.

For people who are at risk of being disempowered, like a person with learning disabilities this does not always happen without intention.

## What does a Circle do?

A Circle of Support helps a focus person to make decisions about their life, change things that may be worrying them or help them to achieve their dreams.

By meeting at intervals the group can review progress with the focus person, discuss new goals and alter the path if that is what the focus person wants.

They intentionally put the person with a learning disability in the centre and help the focus person to stay strong, in charge and in control.

Members bring their own gifts, talents and connections to help get things done.

Circles of Support can be a strategy for connecting people and introducing new ones.

Circles can help make action plans to bring about positive change.

They can help extended family and friends understand more.

We have found that Circles can be fun, informative and supportive for all members involved.

Many thanks for helping Sam\*, I am certain he will benefit so much from his circle of support.

He's heading towards the right direction. Social Worker

## Who to invite into your Circle?

Circle members can be drawn from family, neighbours, friends or other people who know and care about the focus person. The key is to invite them.

Without that 'ask' there may be many people who don't know what to do to help or how to offer it.

We have found that when people are invited to join a Circle they are generally pleased to do so. And if they do say no or only come once, there is no harm done.

Your Circle might be small or large that's okay. They can grow over time and members might come and go.

If there are support workers or other professionals who know the focus person well, you can invite them in to the Circle too.

They may join because they want to.

Or because they want to share ideas and learn from the wider network.

Or they might be able to share their expertise for a short time when there is a particular issue.

We have also found that there might be people who cannot come to meetings, but they still want to be involved.

If this is the case in your Circle, you could ask that person if they could join your meeting via Skype or would they like to receive the notes by email or post to remain informed?

Offer the opportunity for them to share their own ideas for the Circle to discuss, they may be able to offer support to the Circle, like research.

A great way to start is by thinking about who the focus person knows.

If their network is sparse, start small.

Ask the neighbour who you say hi to, they may have wanted to get to know the person better. What about an old friend you haven't called in ages?

*'What can I offer? I don't have any skills'.*

We often hear this from potential Circle members.

However Circle members who thought they would not have much to offer have shared local knowledge, life experience, wisdom, living skills, recipes, jokes, company and much more.

The point is we ALL have something to share. You don't need experts, just people who care.

### **What is a facilitator and how can they help to manage a circle?**

One member, is known as a facilitator.

This role is important as they help the focus person to think about what they might need help with before the first meeting, they help to arrange and run meetings and keep people up to date if they could not attend.

The facilitator can also help a person to think about who else to invite into their circle, and take practical steps, doing the asking, helping to do the inviting etc.

We offer training to people who would like to be a facilitator and support them in their role.

## Inviting people to join.

This is very important. *'If you build it they will come'* might have worked for Kevin Costner but we have found that people like invitations. They like to be wanted.

You can invite people by phone, email, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger or letter.

Tell potential members a little about what you are doing or hoping to do with the Circle. Be welcoming.

A suggested invite could be something like this.

*Dear.*

*We would love for you to join our gathering of xxx's friends at the Red Lion from 2-4pm on 6<sup>th</sup> March.*

*Along with Tea and Cakes we will be exploring ideas and making plans for xxx's future. We welcome your support.*

*Rsvp 079xxxxxxxx*

*This will be the xxx meeting of xxx's Circle of Support.*

*We meet (plan to meet) every x month /s*

## What is the purpose of your Circle?

Items that the focus person might want Circle members to consider and review with them could include.

- Hopes, dreams and life goals
- Having fun and joining new activities
- Making new friends
- Making decisions about support, where to live etc.
- Making financial plans and managing money
- Making a plan for emergencies
- Keeping an eye on things
- Making a plan for the future
- Talking about difficult subjects

## Running your Circle meeting.

Circle meetings can be casual or formal. Regular meetings are best to strengthen the structure and bond between members. Once a month or every 6 weeks is typical.

Some only happen once or twice a year though.

Most meetings take around 1.5 - 2 hours each time. As members are volunteering their time this is important to stick to.

Some take place in the focus person's home, some in local venues.

Most of the time the focus person is there but sometimes Circles do meet without them. This may be because the focus person is not engaged or confident, or there is a sensitive subject to discuss. In this case members should remember to keep the views of the focus person central to their discussion.

Some Circles like to have a plan or agenda to start with. But others just talk about ideas.

You could use a simple agenda like these.

#### *For a first meeting*

- 1. Introductions*
- 2. What is a circle of support*
- 3. Life now and how we want it to be*
- 4. Opportunities, activities and options*
- 5. Reflection, review and feedback*
- 6. When shall we meet again*

#### *For ongoing meetings*

- 1. Review notes from the last meeting and issues arising*
- 2. Update on action points*
- 3. New opportunities*

## **How long will it take to form?**

We know it is generally easier to form a Circle when you have committed people already in your life. When there are few people to draw on the experience from other agencies suggest that it can take up to 2 years to really get going but all Circles are different and some organise quicker.

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There are only a few key points to remember

- Have someone lead Circle meetings

*A facilitator to keep time and people on track*

- Ask someone to take notes

*The actions and important notes and share them with all members*

- Set goals or action plans

*Short and / or Long term. What, When, Who and How*

- Review and reflect

*Take stock, update the goals, decide on the purpose and focus for next time*

- Celebrate success!

*Celebrate the good times and achievements.*

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*There is a sample action plan on the next page.*

## Notes / Action plan

What	Who	By when
Find out costs for cycling sessions	Bill	Next meeting
Speak with MCH about volunteering options	Jean	By 20 <sup>th</sup> March
Speak to a local solicitor and start process to make a trust will	Grace	In next 2 months

### Emergency plans and Circles of Support

One of the issues that comes up often in Circles is what will happen when or if?

Making an effective emergency plan is a great task for a Circle to take on.

List the sort of emergency help the focus person might need. Doing the shopping, cooking, look after the house, contact social services etc.

List the people you know and link the two lists.

Consider how to share contact details, communication passports and other documents the focus person might need them to have

Find a way for this list of people to meet or contact each other if they don't already know each other.

Keep the plan under review as circumstances change.

Practice and learn from any emergencies. How did people respond, what worked? Were there things you had not thought of before?

*It can take a lot of work to get people together, it's a challenge sometimes with our busy lives but believe me it is worth it.*

*Sue\**

## Further support and guidance and resources

Listed below are video clips from other organisations who also support people to develop circles which you might find useful to watch. And of course share with circle members.

They show what a Circle of Support is and can do.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_KdCHblm-4E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KdCHblm-4E)

<https://youtu.be/yVtCGFHPKWY>

[https://youtu.be/w6RX\\_WQmSf4](https://youtu.be/w6RX_WQmSf4)

An Easy Read guide to Circles of Support is available from Sutton Mencap

A guide for facilitators can be found here –

[https://www.pavetheway.org.au/sites/pavetheway.org.au/files/documents/Facilitation ideas and strategies July 2014.pdf](https://www.pavetheway.org.au/sites/pavetheway.org.au/files/documents/Facilitation%20ideas%20and%20strategies%20July%202014.pdf)

Contact details for Circles of Support are:-

- Email - [Jude@Suttonmencap.org.uk](mailto:Jude@Suttonmencap.org.uk)
- Phone – 020 8647 8600
- Address - 8 Stanley Park Road, Wallington, SM6 0EU

As Sutton Mencap's Circles of Support manager I am here to work with you and your family, help with all stages of setting up a circle, get them going in the early stages and answer any questions you might have. When you are ready to we will support you to go it alone. Our aim to ensure your Circle becomes a successful and enduring one.

## What families have said about circles of support?

- Things happen because of the people
- Problems that seemed intractable were solved
- I decided that I couldn't come up with all the ideas myself and that starting a circle could bring in some fresh perspectives.
- My son has had more confidence since the circle started. People who he likes come together and are there to listen to him and make his plans real. It's created a space for him to be heard.
- People really like being involved.