



**Tip
Sheet**

Planning Your Circle of Support Meeting!

Circles of Support originated in Canada over 25 years ago and since then has been used widely in many countries as an idea and practice to intentionally invite people to come together in friendship and support of a person with a disability. Circles of Support harness the goodwill, knowledge and connections of community members rather than services and can assist people to feel more connected to the community. They can also be a useful safeguard for the future. Following are some meeting tips we have learnt along the way.

- ✓ Choose the right venue and time. You want people to feel relaxed and for the space to be welcoming, private and free from distractions. We avoid restaurants, except for celebrations!
- ✓ Meetings are best held at a convenient time for those who work e.g. evenings and weekends.
- ✓ Define your vision, purpose and values with the Circle in the first meeting/s if possible. It will act as an anchor for future meetings and you will be able to refer back to it if people get off track. You can review this every year or when needed.
- ✓ Set the scene for each meeting by setting the purpose at the commencement of each meeting.
- ✓ Start and finish on time and keep the focus. If members get off track or off scope you might 'park' the discussion for another time.
- ✓ Feel the energy of the network - are members engaged? Do they need a break? Is it time to finish?

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- ✓ Build relationship and connection between members. Food is always a good way to share and for members to get to know each other but it should not be the focus of a meeting. Often a planned yearly celebration is a great way to build relationships e.g. doing a 'fun run' together.
- ✓ Make it fun and a good experience for everyone. Some Circles have a quick group sharing activity or game at the beginning of their meeting e.g. in two words describe the past month.
- ✓ 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. Also, some focus people dislike being grilled with hundreds of questions – tune into what works best for them.
- ✓ Always find ways for the Circle to get involved e.g. let the Circle determine the time, venue, ground rules, actions etc. Make the most of people in the room who have particular skills or knowledge! Don't dismiss an offer! Learn to accept, rather than trying to dissuade a member e.g. you're too busy!
- ✓ Use creative ways to run meetings e.g. at the end of the year you might ask all members to write on a sticky note what they think the focus person has achieved for the year and what helped.
- ✓ Be role, goal and action focused. The whole idea of the Circle is to assist a person to make progress towards their goals and live a full and meaningful life in the community. Use the person's interests, passions and abilities as a method for the Circle to think about possible roles in the community.
- ✓ Always find ways to check in with the focus person. Circles can come up with lots of ideas. Some focus people may need time, space and support to consider ideas in an informed and non-pressured way. This might occur after the meeting.
- ✓ Circles are often made up of community members who have been infiltrated with all sorts of assumptions about people with a disability. It's okay to challenge bad ideas with understanding, explanation and kindness.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Create a succession plan. As much as we would like Circle members to stay forever, this is not reality. The Circle may like to spend time thinking about how to replace members when they leave.

Further Information

Visit our web site: www.belongingmatters.org

Tip Sheet: Circles of Support - Meeting Tips

Our periodicals: "Thinking About Circles of Support" and "Thinking About the Art of Asking"

Circle of Support and Microboards (COSAM) web site www.cosam.org.au

Video: "Brodie's Circle of Support" (view on the COSAM web site)

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