



PAVE THE WAY

vision to action through planning

Facilitating a Support Circle

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**Ideas and
Strategies**

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Introduction

The concept of support circles is not a new one. Mutual support in one form or another has always existed, and continues to exist in communities. However, the creation of intentional support circles for people with disabilities has their origins in Canada from the early 1980s.

For many of the families that Pave the Way has worked with a support circle is an intentional safeguarding strategy that families develop to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their family member with disability now and into the future.

It is an intentional strategy providing families with the opportunity to gather together a number of committed and trusted family members and friends to have regular conversations about their vision and their plans for their family member with disability. There is a saying that 'no-one knows as much as all of us'. This expression speaks of the value of gathering people together and regularly.

It is also an opportunity for circle members to come to know the person better and deepen their relationship with them.

An assumption behind a support circle is that families, their networks and communities have the strengths, resources and capacity to ensure a good life for the person with disability that services alone cannot, and should not, be solely responsible for.

The informal nature of the support circle suggests that people who are involved are invited into a relationship with both the person and the family and are not paid to be there.

We believe the strength of a circle lies in the clarity of purpose and the intentionality of who is invited to be a part of what can be a very powerful and intimate experience for all involved.

What is facilitation?

Support circles function well when someone is responsible for facilitating the circle meetings.

Facilitation is defined as: *to make easy or to help progress*. Essentially a facilitator assists a group to have a focused and purposeful conversation and to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in a safe and respectful manner.

In the context of a support circle, the facilitation role is generally an unpaid role that is carried out by either a circle member or by someone from the family's or circle's networks. It is not a professionalised role but one that ordinary folk who have some skill and confidence to lead a group through a process are encouraged to do.

The following ideas are based on Pave the Way's work in facilitating circles and on conversations with others in this role.

Some of the responsibilities of the role include:

- Assisting the family to work out the purpose of each meeting through assisting with agenda setting
- Helping circle members to keep focus, share their ideas and contribute to the discussion
- Tapping into the wisdom, expertise and stories of the whole group
- Delegating roles in the process so you do not solely hold the circle together
- Keeping discussions moving forward by listening, questioning, reflecting back and clarifying
- Leading the group through discussion, brain storming, problem solving and hope building
- Assisting all involved with understanding and respecting the authority of the family through modeling this
- Ensuring that the person with disability has a voice, whether they are present or not
- Ensuring that someone is taking notes, keeping time and setting dates for future meeting/s

Each of these responsibilities can be delegated to individual circle members. However, it is important that the facilitator is aware of the overall process and ensures that either they or others are being responsible for some or all of the process.

What facilitation is not:

- Setting the agenda, but rather meeting with the family or with the family and the circle group to set the agenda
- Having all of the answers, however, it helps to have some good questions
It is important that family and circle members do not assume that all of the questions and answers only rest with the facilitator but with the whole group or others who may not even be present.
- Being a case worker/key worker. The role is limited to the facilitation of the meetings as outlined above.

Facilitation: some ideas and strategies

Agenda setting (how to assist family)

An agenda is a helpful way to establish the purpose and direction of any given circle meeting and not only assists the family to make the best use of the time with the group but assists the facilitator to perform their role effectively.

Discussing the agenda with the family prior to the circle meeting can be done in person or sometimes via the phone. This is the opportunity for both the family and the facilitator to become clear about how the meeting is to be organized and the areas to be discussed.

At times there might not be a need for an agenda. Not all meetings will be task orientated or outcomes based. The family might want the group to simply gather to be with the person, to deepen their relationship through shared story telling over a meal for example. No matter what the purpose of each meeting is, it is always worthwhile naming the purpose so there is shared understanding of the expectations.

Focus questions can assist a family to clarify the purpose of and their hopes and or concerns for each meeting. Some questions might include:

- What do you hope to achieve at the meeting?
- What would you like to focus on?
- How would you like to prioritise these agenda items?

You might also refer to the last meeting and discuss if there is any follow up required.

You can also determine if there are any strategies to use during the meeting to help achieve a desired outcome:

- brainstorming exercise
- giving specific written information to circle members for a deeper discussion
- inviting a guest speaker

Refer to page 10 for more information about these strategies.

Note Taking

Many families find the practice of recording the circle meeting discussion helpful. Notes can assist the group to stay on track and focused and can be a good way of seeing how far the group has come together. Notes can also assist with knowing who is doing what and when and to inform circle members who miss a meeting. Notes also provide an invaluable record of why certain decisions have been made.

Some tips for effective note taking:

- Listen carefully
- Ask the group or main speaker for a summary after a lengthy discussion
- Encourage all of the participants to be aware of contributing to the notes by helping the note taker with wording or context for example
- Use a template for the notes. This can save time. The group could work out the best format to use for capturing the discussion
- Type notes soon after the meeting so you can seek clarity from others while still fresh for them
- Use a laptop for writing notes to avoid needing to rewrite notes
- Send the notes out in a reasonable time frame. Checking what is a reasonable time frame is a discussion worth having with the family and note taker

Example of note taking template

The following template is just one example to help you think about introducing some structure to the note taking. Having a note taking template can help the group to stay focused and on task, and helps the note taker to capture the important points in a discussion. Each group will develop their own style and level of formality.

| |
|---|
| Date |
| Who is here |
| Apologies |
| Follow up from last meeting |
| Agenda discussion main points <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Actions arising from the discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none">• |
| Agenda discussion main points <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Actions arising from the discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none">• |
| Next meeting date/s and food arrangements (if any) |

Notes can have enough detail so that those not present can make sense of the discussion, but not so much detail as to render the notes unwieldy. The content of the notes could fill in the context with a summary of the discussion, decisions made, any concerns or ideas, and suggested actions.

Note taking can be a shared responsibility; it might be a rotated role or speakers need to be responsible for summarising what they say.

As the facilitator you can also assist by summarising what you hear.

Strategies

Brainstorming exercises or the Power of 10

Brainstorming or the Power of 10 exercises (an attachment explaining the power of 10 process will be uploaded in August) are great facilitator tools as they can assist the group to think broadly, creatively and outside the box when trying to find ways to realise the focus person's goals or to address barriers or issues for example. If possible use butcher paper and a flip chart for either of these exercises as they are quite visual. To start a brainstorming session help the group to define the area they want to explore and begin by asking questions such as: What options exist around this idea? How can we make this idea happen? What do we need to do to make this idea happen? Who can we enlist to make this idea happen?

Inviting a guest speaker

Some families find it beneficial when circle members know more about disability related issues or about what is actually possible for people with disabilities to live full and ordinary lives. To achieve this some families:

- Invite a guest speaker to a circle meeting to talk about a particular experience or aspect. Guest speakers might include a specialist working with the person such as a speech therapist or another parent or individual who is achieving similar goals.
- Provide the circle group with written information or DVDs to discuss at circle meetings

Some Specifics of Facilitation

As mentioned earlier the facilitator's role is to make things easier for the group to have a focused and purposeful meeting and there are some specific strategies to assist with this. These strategies include:

Summarise after each agenda item before moving on to the next. This helps the group to commit to a process of discussing and deciding before moving on to other topics.

Clarify what is being said, from time to time, so that there is shared understanding.

Assist the group to move **good ideas into good actions**. Again using some focus questions: there were some great suggestions in the discussion how do you propose to make those suggestions happen? What next, who can do this? Etc.

Act as a model in relation to **respect for the family** and their authority.

Build confidence in the group by valuing their contributions and by encouraging members to take on small roles and to develop skills, such as note taking, keeping time, or finding information for instance.

Ensure that everyone in the circle has the opportunity over time to **understand the process of the meetings**.

Don't feel that you have to over facilitate by **filling in the silences**. Sometimes people need time to think. If you are always quick to fill the silences you will train the group to depend on you for the answers. If a silence goes on too long, you can ask the group why it has become quiet. Is there an elephant in the room that needs to be named and discussed?

Assist the person with disability to have a **voice**, whether they are present or not and advocate for the individual and their family (in the circle context).

Ask **who else, other than parents**, may have a role, interest, responsibility.

Consider the **resources** that are available to the family to help achieve particular goals: money- personal/funding, information, other people, and the community etc.

Make time for **reflection** ~ to reflect on the circle's journey, a meeting in particular or other aspects important to the group

Celebrate achievements, Christmas, circle anniversaries etc

Trouble shooting some of the challenges

Group dynamics

Most circle groups do not have difficulty with group dynamics as families are very good at discerning who to involve in their support circle. But at times the dynamics may raise issues which should be addressed as positively and with good humour, as soon as possible.

One person dominating discussions

- Ask another person what they think?
- Ask the person to hold their thoughts for later if there is time, or to write down their thoughts for later. If there was not enough time to bring it back to the group then you could follow it up with a private conversation.
- Encourage everyone to allow some time for others to think so that they can also contribute to the discussion.

Circle members not actively participating in discussion

- Not everyone is as confident putting their ideas forward. You might ask them privately when the meeting is finished what they think about a particular discussion.
- Sometimes the quieter members will speak privately with the parents at other times than meetings.

Family feeling overwhelmed by ideas or conversations

- Establish and remind everyone that the family has the right of veto and does not need to justify why. It can simply be because they are not ready to hear something, or something has happened in the past that the discussion has triggered, which makes it difficult for them to consider.

No focus/direction.

From time to time all circle groups seem to struggle with maintaining the momentum or focus of the meetings. It may be quite natural in the scheme of things but it is important not to falter to the point of becoming unworkable.

Some remedies for this might include:

- Assisting the group to understand the family's vision as the vision can provide the framework of the meetings.

- Revisiting the family's vision to create ideas and goals on which to focus.
- Reflecting on how far the group has come and on some of the achievements.
- Organising a facilitated planning session or review to set new goals and direction.
- Reviewing periodically the purpose of the circle meetings to work out if it is still current or whether it has changed or needs to change.
- Appointing a 'holder of the vision' – someone who can use the vision as a lens for discussions
- Using written material for informing circle members and to prompt discussion around a particular topic
- Inviting a guest speaker around a particular topic or issue
- Asking the group to suggest ways they could and would like to get to know the person better.
- Speaking with other families who also have a support circle. This can be a huge source of support, information and ideas sharing about any stumbling blocks a circle experience.

When ideas generate a lot of work for the family

Support circles can be a lot of work. Circle members can contribute some great ideas but not necessarily take on any responsibility for their own ideas. This often means the family has more work to do. Sometimes this work is the responsibility of the family, but it might also be an opportunity to look beyond the family, to circle members or to ask:

- Who else has a role, interest or responsibility here? It might be someone in the room, it might be someone from the circle members' extended networks (you know what we mean ~ a friend of a friend's cousin's sister-in-law's father!).

When the tone becomes negative

It is inevitable that families will sometimes need to discuss difficult issues; however, it is important that the focus is not overly on problems. This can lead to a culture of

negativity rather than on focusing on the positive vision the family has for their family member.

The facilitator's role here is to refocus the group. Some of the ways you might do this include:

- Ask the group if they want to spend the small amount of time they have to debrief about the situation or would they like to move forward with a resolution or onto another agenda item?
- Name and revisit the vision and the purpose to ward off uncomfortable ideas or negativity
- Reframe a negative view or comment into a positive light (i.e. the view that, 'Janet is so controlling', can also be translated as 'like all of us Janet likes to make her own decision about things that are important to her').
- If a circle member has become overly negative the family might reconsider the value of that person's contribution to the circle. Some families have responded to this by having a core group with whom they meet frequently and focus on their family's vision and planning, and another group that gets together less frequently and on a more social basis around their family member.

Some things we cannot assume about the support circle:

- Circle members know each other ~ they may know of each other but not necessarily know one another
- Plans will evolve quickly ~ planning a good life takes time and is ongoing, so put time in perspective
- Things will go according to plan ~ life is messy and often abstract
- Trust is implicit ~ it needs to be built over time
- Extended family members and even siblings know the full history and day to day issues concerning the individual

Reflection and reviews

Many families find it helpful to reflect on or review the circle regularly to ensure it retains its focus and momentum. This can happen in a number of ways.

- Have a follow up conversation after a circle meeting with family/individual if you think it is needed or it is requested by the family
- Reviews can happen formally through an organization such as Pave the Way or through a private consultant who offers this service. They can also be arranged informally by the group. Some questions that can assist reflection include, but are not limited to the following.
 - Purpose and shared understanding:
Are circle members clear about the purpose of the circle?
Do circle members understand the family's vision?
Do circle members know enough about the person to competently assist them with their planning?
 - The practicalities of the meetings:
Are the times and frequency of meetings still working?
Does the note taking role need to be rotated?
Does membership need to grow?
Is there a need for any ground rules about participation etiquette to be set by the group?
 - The facilitator role, how is that going?
Would the group benefit from rotating the role among competent circle members?
Do circle members clearly understand the facilitator's role?

Ongoing support

Through talking with facilitators over many years we have learned that facilitators benefit from having opportunities to talk about practice issues and from continued learning and reflection. Self-evaluation is also good practice, to think about your qualities and where your strength and weaknesses lie and what support you may need. Pave the Way encourages facilitators to tap into the support that is offered through Pave

the Way. This support can happen at a time and a place convenient to you in the following ways

- Individual support, via phone, email, and in person
- Meeting with facilitator, family member and Pave the Way
- Peer meetings with other circle facilitators
- Written information

On a final note, know that the process gets easier over time. Support circles, like all groups, need a chance to form, and it can take quite a lot of time for circle members to find their own particular rhythm and role within the group and to really understand the purpose. Don't be afraid of the messiness, slowness or occasional lapse of focus of the circle. If you reflect and evaluate together and try and establish a culture of shared ownership, circle members, along with the family, will find a way forward.