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Abstract:

This article explores the role of support workers in helping to facilitate relationships for the person they support. Without guidance, a well meaning support worker can limit the person they support to be an 'activity doer' rather than supporting them to make connections and fulfil their potential.

As a parent or friend of a person with disability it is useful to review the relationship of the support worker in your family member's life. If you are a support worker, reading this article may inspire and assist you to facilitate and encourage relationships for the person you support.

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Using Support to Build Relationships

Everyone needs friendships and relationships. It is real connection to others that gives meaning to life, keeps people safe and makes life rich, interesting, fun and diverse. Without friendships, relationships and connection to others, life is bleak and superficial.

People with disabilities often don't have friendships and relationships. Many only have close family and paid support workers. Paid support workers can do a fantastic job in difficult circumstances but they also move on to other jobs or places. For people with disabilities this means that their life consists of many people who come and go over the years and of very few people, if any, who are there because of a deep and lasting commitment to them.

Support workers can play an important role here. As well as providing respite for the primary carers, they can build relationships for the person they support, particularly if that support is in the community.

Let's take my son, Jackson, as an example. Jackson is 22 years old and has no friends. He has three brothers, who all live in other states, and his parents. He needs enduring relationships other than these if he is to have a life of quality rich in people and experiences.

Jackson is a difficult young man to know and all too often he seems to be The Ghost Who Walks. He can be standing right beside you but appears to be invisible. People do not speak to him or acknowledge him. You might wonder if he has disappeared altogether but when you look he is still there.

Support workers can inadvertently foster this seeming invisibility. They 'do for' rather than 'do with', so that Jackson is cast into the constant role of receiver of support and the person being minded. People speak to the worker and not to him, hand drinks, food and change to the worker and not to him. Thus, he is in the midst of people but no-one interacts with him unless the interaction is directed to him by the worker.

Without guidance, Jackson's support workers tend to turn him into a never-ending activity doer; a client who wanders around Civic or Questacon or the National Museum or the War Memorial. A person who goes swimming or driving or bowling or to fetes and fairs but who does not interact with other people. He remains a person no-one speaks to and who is not introduced to others or noticed by anyone. The perpetual Ghost Who Walks.

Many people with disabilities are seen in the same way. It is the difficult job of family, friends and support workers to make our sons and daughters visible, of

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presenting them as people who have the same wants, needs and rights as any other, of presenting them as people with unique personalities.

If people with disabilities are to form relationships outside their family and their paid support workers they need to do the same thing at the same time on the same day each week. This gives them the opportunity to know and be known by others. This is the only way relationships develop – through frequent meeting of the same people through a shared interest or shared activity, even if that activity is as simple as having a drink at a café.

Support workers can use their position to:

- Build relationships between the person they support and others
- Link the person to many people and places
- Find opportunities for the person to be known to people through regular, predictable, age and sex appropriate activities
- Present the person as a customer, participant, thrill seeker, swimmer, gym goer, music lover, singer etc not as a person with a disability who is being supported on an outing
- Include the person in any exchanges with others – do not order, purchase, converse as if they aren't there. Direct conversation to them.

If you are a support worker, after you have supported the person, ask yourself:

- Who did I introduce them to today?
- Who greeted them by name?
- How many more people know them this week than last week?
- What did they enjoy?
- What did they learn?

This makes the support worker role more challenging but ultimately more interesting. For people with disabilities, it is vital that support workers take on the role of ambassador and community linker. Many people with disabilities have no-one else who can take on this role so they have no chance of fully participating in life with its richness of relationships and friends.

Are you up for the challenge?

Sally is a teacher, trainer, writer and advocate, and represents families on various government and non-government reference groups, steering committees and boards. She has presented at national and international conferences, workshops and forums.

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