

step 2

nurturing **friendship**

Call it a clan, call it a network,
call it a tribe, call it family.
Whatever you call it,
whoever you are, you need one.
You need one
because you are human.

JANE HOWARD, FAMILIES

Written by David Ocean, Independent Facilitator

A Chain Reaction: Reflections from an Independent Facilitator

I work with a young man who for years had been happy to stay at home playing video games in his room. When we first began meeting together Sean always communicated more or less the same message in different words: Things are great, I'm great, I don't need anything or anyone.

In time Sean admitted that he did, in fact, have life goals, such as attending college and landing a decent job. Despite his overwhelming fear that he was headed for disaster, Sean agreed to attend an information session on a college program we had researched together. At the time, even the act of leaving his house felt like a big risk.

The idea of connecting to others in his community was not in the forefront of this young man's mind when he first decided to check out college. After successfully enrolling and attending classes, however, what became almost immediately obvious was that Sean's new school connections were beginning to transform the way he was seeing himself: While college had quickly become "a thing he does", it was the people he met who had begun reflecting back his value – his charm, humour and intelligence – that truly began a transformative experience for him.

Today Sean is still focused on working hard at school. At the same time, his ideas about who he is and what he's capable of in the world have completely shifted. The new path he's carved out for himself, and the many new friendships and connections he's made have radically transformed his sense of self.

Connecting those we support with the wider community is a pillar of our work, but it works best if it's done in line with an individual's genuine personal goals. Were it not for the "chain reaction" which occurred after Sean opened up about his desire to attend college, this young man might never have found the motivation to "get out to meet new people". To see him in action now, you'd never guess his goal was anything other than to forge new friendships and connect with his community.

step 2

Nurturing Friendship

It's incredibly hard to imagine someone who can care for your family member with the same commitment, interest, and determination as you do. That's a fact. However, the reality is that you likely won't be part of your family member's entire lifespan. So, what's the next best thing? The best guarantee of a safe and secure future for a person who has a disability is the number of caring and committed friends, family members, acquaintances, and supporters actively involved in their life. It's as simple and complicated as that.

The real strength of these caring relationships comes not just in their connection to the person who has a disability but in their connections with each other. Imagine a spider's web. The strands extend from the centre of the web to the edge. If there was nothing else holding the strands together, they would flap in the wind. Their functional value would be impaired. They need to be linked with each other to form the web. The strength of the web comes when each strand is connected.

It's the same for our family members. The focus of support for people with disabilities must be placed both on their individual relationships and the relationships among the members of their network of support. These connections create the web of support. We call these ***circles of support***.

A circle of support involves a group of people intentionally coming together to help create, promote and support the vision of your family member's good life. The circle acts as a community of friendship and support, with the person at the centre. This group comes together for three basic purposes: the safety, health and well-being of your family member. It can do this by providing practical advice, addressing problems and generating creative ideas to contribute positively to the person's life but also by being there to listen, encourage, and celebrate. People in support circles are typically friends, family, allies, chosen family, and community members, with professionals being invited to join as guests.

If we believe that people keep people safe, then people who love and are committed to your family member will need a way to be intentionally involved with them. A circle of support that meets purposefully is one way to do that. A healthy circle of support is one where all members are in touch with each other, coordinating their involvement. Each person takes on a different role, with some individuals highly involved, while others will play supportive yet crucial roles. These roles are likely to evolve over time. Members will each have a role to play in your family member's life and bonds of friendship, love, and trust will unite them. This is the sum of everything you embody but won't be able to provide forever.

A note of clarification, while a **circle of support** is made up of the unpaid people in someone's life who intentionally come together, there may be a broader network of relationships. These relationships, which can be both paid and unpaid, might be referred to as someone's **support network**. Within that broad network of people, you might have a paid **support team** that could include direct support professionals who provide day-to-day personal care and accompaniment or people they consult with, like their doctor, speech pathologist, case coordinator, etc. We all have a blend of paid and unpaid relationships in our lives. The experience of many people with disabilities is that they tend to have more paid support than others, which is absolutely fine. The trick, however, is finding the balance of paid and unpaid relationships within someone's life. How can we meet a person's needs without surrounding them with only paid people or putting too much reliance on unpaid support from family and friends? Our family members will likely need paid supports for different reasons and at different levels of intensity in their lives, but we must also balance this with a strong belief that unpaid relationships and friendships are possible, necessary, and something worth pursuing in all our lives.

The role of friendship in our lives

Friendship is a necessity for all of us, and conversely, loneliness can have detrimental effects on health and well-being. Friendship is a key part of our lives, but we often take it for granted. We may not realize how important it is until we think about it or feel it slipping away. Building friendships is important, but it can be tough to sustain and needs effort. There are no simple steps to guarantee a successful relationship.

Friends make
gifts and gifts
make friends.

INUIT PROVERB

When asked to boil our life down to its basics, most of us would agree that we are interdependent, not independent beings. The effect of this recognition is much greater than our society understands or recognizes. Understanding this interdependence is critical to our health, our quality of life, our sense of belonging, our peace of mind, and our security. And, therefore, it is also fundamental to the future security of our family members with disabilities. The work of a former family group in Ontario called the Ubuntu Initiative, was founded on the premise that we are all interconnected. The Zulu philosophy of Ubuntu can be understood to mean, “I am, because you are” and also “I am, because we are.” This family group’s work was to support others to recognize our interconnectedness as a way of prioritizing relationship when building a person’s good life and planning for the future.

The foundation of this future security is not the size of the estate you leave or whether you have a Will. Yes, these are important factors in building a successful future plan. But they are not enough. We agree with Emily Dickinson who wrote, “my friends are my estate.” Caring relationships and friends can change our lives and can help make it worthwhile. Friendships—ranging from acquaintances to intimate relationships—are formed by choice. They can be freely given to each other, based on mutual interests. They are a two-way exchange. Friendships are not one-sided. They are not paid visitors. They are not volunteers. They are not one-to-one workers.

Good friends support us through good times and bad, when we are on our best behaviour, and when we are not. Our gifts and our weaknesses are accepted as part of who we are. Our friends are not expected to fix us. Our friends accept us for who we are. They help us explore our interests. They can offer a hug or a word of advice during a tough time. They are there in times of celebration.

Written with gratitude by Anna Bruno, Friend and Circle Member

It's All About Relationship

Rebecca's grey, wheelchair-accessible van was my classroom. From the passenger seat I listened to Rebecca's mom, Susan, tell me stories of their life, offer perspectives I had not considered and eventually together, we debated how to put theory into practice while Rebecca encouraged the conversations with her laughter and smiles from the middle row.

I remember Susan telling me that when Rebecca was young, a woman said to her that if she had a child like Rebecca, the most important thing in her life would be building relationships - solid relationships that would support her throughout life.

Rebecca was born with a disability that meant she needed support for all her daily tasks and that she didn't communicate in traditional ways apart from her joyful smile and thoughtful gaze. Her life depended on the care and support of other people, so of course, building relationships made a lot of sense. This conversation shaped Susan's thinking and from then on, she developed a lens of relationship-building. It was like wearing special glasses, helping her see fertile places for friendships and connections to form. When she considered opportunities for Rebecca, she paused to consider; will this place or activity or role foster meaningful relationships? And if they didn't, they went elsewhere. This lens led Rebecca to be present where other kids her

age were: the local preschool, Brownies and Girl Guides, and her local elementary and high schools. It also led her to me or rather, I to her. We met at our church over a love of dance.

Our relationship has grown over the years from volunteer, to paid supporter, and eventually to friend. We've gotten to know one another through dance and our own adventures in the van. In our twenties, Rebecca invited me to join her in auditing a summer course in liturgical dance at Boston College. I got to be alongside her as she and her mom spoke at the United Nations. We danced together for the Pope at World Youth Day. As we both aged, the big adventures slowed down but our connection grew deeper. We witnessed important moments in each other's lives- celebrated birthdays, consoled each other in sad times. Recently as women in our 40's we accepted our aging bodies as they were and danced in a community arts event about connecting to our roots. Rebecca also shares her time to co-lecture with me in the Developmental Service Worker program at a local college. Somewhere along the way, the teacher in that van became Rebecca, as Susan always knew would happen. Susan set up the context for Rebecca to be really seen for everything she had to offer. Rebecca did the rest. While I may have begun thinking I was helping her, Rebecca's presence in my life set me along a path I hadn't imagined

for myself. She guided me in creating a life that aligns with my values, positively impacting both myself and those around me.

This is true too for the many people who came to know Rebecca in all the places she showed up, wheeling along in her wheelchair. The kids who skipped rope with her at recess, the students who walked alongside her as she graduated high school, and the children she helped in her various volunteer roles grew up to be doctors and bus drivers and lawyers. Teachers and healthcare workers, neighbours and community members have all benefitted from getting to know Rebecca. In fact, Rebecca's role as a teacher has helped each person she encountered long enough to make a real connection, shift their perspective about disability, belonging and possibility. And for me this was all because Susan never took off those glasses. She knew that all kinds of relationships were important- the kinds that would last forever and the kind that might be just for a moment. She practiced the skills of hospitality and nurturing relationships, even when it was difficult and even when faced with the threat of rejection or the feeling of wasted efforts. She did this because all that work had a rippling effect, making Rebecca's life a safer, happier one and at the same time having a lasting impact on her community, making it a more welcoming place. As Susan would often say, "it's all about relationship."

An important distinction to note is the relationship between our family member and paid supporters. Paid support workers are not friends. They can be incredibly friendly and do a lot of things together that look like friendship, but the reality is that until that relationship moves beyond a paid role, they remain present in someone's life because they are paid to be there. This can be hard on families especially because of the intimate ways supporters are involved in our lives. When a paid supporter moves on and the relationship ends abruptly, it can have a hurtful impact on our family member if they have viewed this person as a friend. This does not mean, however, that paid supporters are not important - in fact quite the opposite! It just means that we need to have different expectations for the type of relationships they have with our family member. We cannot count on them to fulfill the same roles as friends do. If our paid supporters have the same focus of building relationship, they can be incredibly helpful in doing the work of bridging to other relationships. It is true that some supporters do move into the role of friend, but this is not the rule or expectation. Clearly defining roles at the start of relationships helps greatly when these roles eventually come to an end. We all have different types of relationships in our lives. It is often necessary and desirable to use paid supports, but we should also strive for unpaid friendships with people who choose to be with our family member.

It is through friendships when we are truly loved and valued, that we gain a sense of belonging. When we feel like we belong, we change for the better. Our confidence improves as does our self-esteem, our sense of well-being, and our quality of life. Life takes on new meaning.

What we know:

- People with supportive social ties are less likely to become ill.
- Social contact helps us to heal more quickly.
- Social supports affect the sense of control we have over our well-being and improve our ability to stick with healthy behaviour patterns.

Success in school and career life is directly correlated with the size and health of our social networks. Social networks are also a determinant of health. There is now a mass of evidence to indicate that social ties may be one of the critical factors distinguishing those who remain healthy from those who fall ill. Research has identified that human social connection is as important to health and well-being as eating healthy food or engaging in physical activity (Hill & MacGillvray, 2023). According to the U.S Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy's report on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation facing America (2023), it's stated that the health risks of being lonely are as detrimental as cigarette smoking. Statistics Canada's Quality of Life Indicators data notes that among all people with and without a disability, 13.4% report feeling lonely always or often however when we look just at people living with a disability or long-term condition, this number increased to 21.7% (2025). Feelings of being lonely and having little or weak support connections affects all dimensions of health and affects all people. It is especially important however, that we consider the social relationships of people who might be further isolated by disability. Focusing on friendships is necessary for good health.

Reciprocity

Friends are people who help you but just as important, friends are people you can help. In this kind of mutual relationship, receiving help does not indicate dependence so much as it is what naturally occurs among people who are friendly with one another. Circle members often describe how meaningful their relationship is with the person at the centre of the circle of support. They often experience benefits from the social ties they form with other members of the circle too. They talk about getting as much as they give. This is called reciprocity.

In the context of relationships, our family members are contributors. We will come back to this idea and how integral reciprocity is in building connection.

Caring relationships: a source of support

Think of our own lives. You might have experienced a time where you have needed support, and you remember friends who have come to support you during that time. Perhaps it was a time when someone you loved had passed away. We want this same caring, secure environment for our family member who has a disability when this happens to us as well - when we die. This means formalizing the existing relationships of our family member into a circle of support or creating a new circle around them. It is the only answer to the question, "Who will replace you when you are gone?" Circles of support can become the next best thing. Circles of support can provide the same kind of foundation and care that you did. Nothing offers peace of mind better than that.

There is no
idea more ancient
than a circle of
friends. And there
is nothing more
predictable than
the discovery by
such a circle
that the one
in need is
somehow helping
the others.

JOHN RALSTON SAUL

The good feelings that arise from our connectedness to others are an obvious benefit of friendship. However, these good feelings are just the beginning in evaluating the benefits of caring relationships. Investing in an extended network of friends and family for our family member provides both short-term and long-term benefits.

When it is time to monitor and advocate, our family members with disabilities will benefit from the presence of friends and supporters.

People who lack supportive ties are vulnerable to a wide variety of negative consequences. If not surrounded by people who have a vested interest in their well-being, our family members may be at risk for abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Further, the needs of our family members can be ignored by a busy, overworked service system unless friends are present.

The power and potential of circles of support can far exceed our expectations.

In a study done in the United Kingdom, authors Wistow et al. (2016) described the host of benefits to the person, the family and the system:

- Circles provided a range of support to the individual and their families
- Circles helped to plan for and manage (individualized) funding

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- Circles helped people and families navigate relationships with government systems (especially around funding) and enabled people to present solutions rather than need to ask for help with the problem
 - Circles supported the mental health of the primary caregivers
 - Circles improved the quality of life of the person at the center and their families

In addition to those benefits listed in the research, circle members may also:

- Serve as executors and trustees or as advisors
- Act as supportive decision-makers (see Step 4 of this book)
- Respond promptly and effectively to crises
- Solve problems and handle the unexpected
- Hold on to the wishes of parents and knowledge of the family's history

Circle members can serve in these roles as well as improve quality of life through spending time celebrating and having fun.

Stages of a Circle of Support

There is a history in Ontario of people and families building circles of support. The first formal network was formed around advocate, author and speaker, Judith Snow. Following Judith's Joshua Committee (as her circle was named), there were other people and families who initiated a circle for a variety of reasons with and without the formal support of a Facilitator. When looking to build a circle of support, you may wish to enlist the help of a Facilitator or someone working in a similar role like Community Connectors as they are called by the organization PLAN in British Columbia.

As an organization, PLAN hires a Community Connector, who works an average of two to six hours per month, to create and nurture networks. Vickie Cammack, Founding Director of PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship,

and co-author of the original edition of this book, developed this program. She advises that Community Connectors should “do as much as necessary and as little as possible.” From PLAN’s deep experience in helping to create support networks, Vickie describes that the circle members close and caring relationships that developed with each other is beneficial to everyone, especially the person at the centre of support. PLAN says this takes bonding takes time, with the average being about 2 years, so be realistic in your expectations.

STAGE ONE: EXPLORATION - This is the time for the supported family member, family, and any other supports already involved to identify and focus on interests, passions, and possibilities for meeting others. Remember, it’s hard to make connections if we are not out doing the things that bring us into contact with others.

If there is a Facilitator involved or someone you trust who can help you think in this way, they can support your family to have these exploratory conversations to figure out who your family member wants to BE and what things they may want to try out to accomplish this. At the end of this period, you may know more about your family member, you might have a set of objectives, a timeline of activities or next steps, and a list of potential circle members. A Facilitator can help in documenting all of this from the conversations you’ve had together.

STAGE TWO: DEVELOPMENT - This is the time when all the leads and possibilities are followed up, contacts are made, and invitations extended. The goal in this stage is to recruit circle members and introduce them to each other. Practical strategies are developed. Circles will develop a natural cadence of their own, in terms of how they meet, where, how often, for how long and what they will discuss. There may be some trial and error – but it’s always a learning process.

STAGE THREE: MAINTENANCE - By this time caring relationships have formed, and networks meet regularly. The network settles in for the long run. As new interests emerge—and they often do—new connections are made. The circle gets stronger and becomes more dynamic. Members know their roles and understand the nature of their contribution to one another.

I would just like
to have someone
call and ask me
out for a coffee.
That doesn't
happen to me.

JAMES

What a network means to James

All my life I've been alone because I had no friends and no place to go. When my mom told me about having a network, I had a few questions... Would these people be my friends? Would they like to talk about music and photography? My mom said the network would be what I wanted it to be. So I thought about it and this is what I would want from my network:

- Friends who want to spend time with me
- Being with musicians that share my love of music
- People who will help me with my music and photography projects
- Getting out of the house and spending time in the community
- Not having to spend so much time with my parents
- Finding a relationship with a companion
- No more being lonely or bored

In summary, what we've learned about circles of support is:

- They take time, about two years on average, to become a smoothly functioning team.
- It's important to focus on people's interests, passions, and what they can do. There are enough people focusing on what they can't do.
- Connections among and between network members are as important as their relationship to the person at the centre.
- There are more people interested in developing a caring relationship with your family member than you may think!

Written by Clovis Grant, Parent

Everybody's gotta have friends...

"Everybody's gotta have friends."

These are words from one of the Disney classics, A Jungle Book and apropos to the topic: Friendships amongst people with special needs.

My son Isaiah has autism. Although he is not the most skilled with social interactions, in the neurotypical sense, he likes to be around people. Given what I understood from my readings about autism, I struggled to understand how this could be true for my son. I truly thought that, because my son has autism, did not want or need friends due to his limited verbal communication and apparent lack of interest in social interactions. I was wrong. I learned this when he started getting invitations to birthdays and other parties from people we did not know...kids in his class at school. I remember going to the Mandarin restaurant for a party on an annual basis to celebrate the birthday of one of his classmates who had even less verbal skills than my son. I learned that the parents approached the teacher asking about who in the class their son got along with and who seemed to be bonding with him. Isaiah was one of those classmates. It was not a coincidence either because when we asked our son about the names of some of the kids in his class, he would also excitedly mention the name of this same student...the coincidence was now gone. It brought my wife and I smiles,

because our son had a friend. While the relationship was not like yours or mine might look like, as neurotypical people, it was clear that they enjoyed each other's company and is that not what being a friend is all about?

It did not end there. As he got older, he got regular invites from one of his teammates from baseball to attend birthday and other gatherings....and here is the kicker.... my wife and I "could come as well, if we wanted". Someone wanted our son to be with them—without us! My wife and I looked at each other and without hesitation, responded with a 'yes' to the invitation for him to attend. We also made the decision, now that he was in his mid-twenties, that we would not attend, although we may pop in just to say hi, but as we did with his older neurotypical brother, we would drop him off and pick him up when he called to let us know he was ready to leave. He has a cell phone and while still not a talker, he is learning to use it to reach us when needed.

It was heart-warming for us that our child with limitations, as defined by greater society, could be a friend to someone and someone could be a friend to him. While he may not be able to hold down a conversation, there is a special bond there that they enjoy in each other's company. I was humbled and sad that I had such low expectations for my son's humanity, about

his need and his desire for friendship. While he does enjoy his solitary games on the computer, he jumps at the opportunity to go to his hockey and baseball games and tournaments, dances and even church and parties, even with his family. Isaiah enjoys being around people, much more so than with his computer games and videos which he really, really likes.

As social beings, it should not have surprised me that my son with autism also likes to be social...although it may not fit my definition of what meaningful social interactions should look like. There are many things that I feel awkward about but it does not mean I don't want to do them. In the same way, I need to continue to encourage Isaiah in his relationships... and who knows, the next step may be to have a romantic partner... but let's not go there right now. That is another topic for another time.

When you consider the varied relationships of both unpaid and paid roles like those in someone's support team, these themes also hold true. Time, attention and effort to build relationships among the broader support team yield great value as does being aligned on a common vision. Unpaid, natural supports model the values of the circle and help paid supports focus their work to be aligned with a shared vision. Together, support networks have the greatest potential of achieving the vision that has been established by your family member.

We understand that we need to build relationship between paid and natural, unpaid supports for best outcomes. We can also utilize paid supports to assist us in our work to increase opportunities for natural friendships. Because friendships do not always develop naturally for some of our family members with disabilities, it is often helpful to approach the development of caring relationships and the building of a circle in a focused and strategic manner. Sometimes this process can be helped along by others including paid supports. Whether this is a role like a Community Connector (as they are called at PLAN), an Independent Facilitator or a paid direct support worker, these are some of the qualities these roles can share when it comes to being great at bridging relationships.

These kinds of supporters:

- Recognize and nurture the capacities and gifts of everyone
- Pay attention to detail
- Are great at planning events
- Are creative, pragmatic, and reflective
- Know their community and use their connections

Independent facilitation

We've mentioned the role of a facilitator in addition to PLAN's Community Connectors but want to pause to offer further context for this unique role. People with disabilities and their families may seek assistance from an Independent Facilitator to help develop circles of support and address various aspects of their lives. Independent Facilitators can support people to

Community is
where “we”
becomes “us.”

TOM BRODHEAD

make the changes in their lives that matter most to them. They can support people in creative ways to connect to their community, explore options for a home of their own, discover opportunities to work, volunteer and contribute to their communities as well as nurture new relationships.

In Ontario, Independent Facilitation is an established practice. In 2015, the Ministry of Community and Social Services provided funding for the Independent Facilitation Demonstration Project. Throughout this two-year project, seven Independent Facilitation Organizations provided Independent Facilitation to 1,100 people.

Under the leadership of the Ontario Independent Facilitation Network (OIFN.ca), other organizations have stepped up to provide Independent Facilitation and the practice is expanding across the province. In addition to the OIFN, Partners for Planning maintains a directory of independent facilitators so that people and families can find supports that work for them. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services allows for independent facilitation to be an eligible planning expense both through Passport funding (for adults) and Special Services at Home (for children). Developmental Service Workers programs include content and a greater focus on planning and more person-directed supports. Attention is being placed on expanding the availability and quality of planning and facilitation supports across the province.

While the scope of Independent Facilitation may be more intense than with Community Connectors, both believe the foundation of a good life is based on supportive relationships and personal networks. With a strong network in place, almost anything is possible.

The art of making friends

Did you know that over 50 percent of the first attempts pre-schoolers make to join in a group with other children are rejected? They must keep trying before being accepted by their peers.

In other words, the first step in meeting another person is a learned skill that comes with practice. This is a skill that most of us take for granted and which developed more or less naturally for most of us. A psychologist, Dr.

Michael Guralnick, has observed that children with disabilities often do not experience this trial-and-error process (2019). He suggests that there are three skills which very young children develop while playing with each other:

1. They learn how to initiate contact with peers;
2. They learn how to maintain play. These are the skills we learn to keep the interaction or relationship going;
3. They learn conflict resolution. Inevitably in any caring relationship, we have to learn to negotiate, to share, and to compromise.

Friendships rarely develop by chance. We may cultivate friendships as carefully as we nurture a job or a family, a talent or a hobby. Some of us may think that friendships only happen naturally and that, if they don't occur, there is nothing we can do about it. This is not necessarily true. There appears to be a certain skill set associated with initiating and developing our acquaintances and friendships. In addition to that, presence and participation matters. People with disabilities still find themselves having to push back against systems that exclude them from spaces and opportunities that would offer exposure and practice in the art of building friendships.

The ability to make friends may have to be relearned for some. As a result of an accident or injury, their friends may have drifted away, and their social circle may have changed dramatically. They may have had limited opportunity for socializing because of institutional living. They may be surrounded by staff that don't recognize the importance of friendship or don't know how to facilitate it. They may have tried to make friends, were rebuffed, and then became discouraged from trying again. They may lack or have lost confidence. They may believe that no one would want to be their friend.

If friendship is an art, there may be some people who seem naturally talented. But for most of us we need opportunity, we need to learn the skills in ways that meet our needs and capacity. We must continuously develop and nurture those skills. It's a journey that everyone is on, requiring consistent effort and nurturing. We will sometimes need help to master the art of friendship.

Written by Matt McKeown, Friend

Friendship means Commitment

Mitch and I first met in 2016 at a private gym where I had just started building my career as a personal trainer. His parents, clients of my mentor, began bringing Mitch in for training. Unfortunately, his initial trainer struggled to work with him due to Mitch's developmental disability. At the time, few trainers in the Greater Toronto Area, myself included, had experience with clients like Mitch. But I couldn't shake the feeling that Mitch wasn't being treated fairly. So, I offered to take over his training.

At first, it wasn't easy. Mitch didn't enjoy exercise, struggled with motor skills, and often had difficulty staying focused. I had to unlearn much of what I thought I knew about training and adapt to his needs. Each session became a lesson in patience and creativity. Some days were smooth, while others required me to think on my feet to keep him engaged.

As I got to know Mitch, something changed. Our sessions became more than just workouts; they became moments of connection. We started spending time together outside the gym—grabbing a bite to eat, going to movies, or simply hanging out. This wasn't about doing something “nice” or fulfilling a duty; it was a natural progression of a friendship. Mitch wasn't just a client anymore; he was a friend.

When I'm with Mitch, I feel like I don't need a cloak—I don't need to hide my inner self. He has no expectations other than

a promise to get him home safely and, perhaps, some pizza along the way. What I love most is that there's no pressure for extra words. Often, we say very little, and that's enough. There's no forced need to connect through speech; our time together and shared presence speak volumes.

Our bond grew organically. Mitch came to my wedding, and we've gone on walks, attended concerts, and shared countless laughs. We visit each other's homes, and our time together feels no different from when I spend time with my other friends. If anything, Mitch has taught me more about myself than I ever expected.

This friendship has pushed me to confront my own biases and assumptions. Initially, I was nervous and unsure if I could rise to the challenge. But I quickly realized that Mitch, like anyone else, deserved understanding and connection. His presence in my life has been a constant reminder to look beyond labels and see the person.

Looking ahead, I'm excited and nervous for what the future holds for Mitch. I worry about what will happen when his parents are no longer there to support him. Mitch loves his home and finds comfort in familiar surroundings, so change might be difficult. Yet, I know I'll be there for him every step of the way. Friendship means commitment, and Mitch has taught me the true meaning of that.

How caring relationships challenge families

Many families do recognize the importance of caring relationships in their family member's life and want to assist their loved one around friendships, but they often feel some hesitancy when it comes to actively seeking opportunities for these relationships to form. From our experience, there are three challenges that families face: asking, opening, and believing.

ASKING To ask is to be vulnerable. There is always the possibility of refusal. Yet reaching out and asking is integral to developing and deepening our relationships. Friendships often form because we ask others to participate in a shared activity. We invite acquaintances over for tea to get to know them better. We ask neighbours to help us with building a fence. We ask friends to give us a hand with setting up for a party. Each of these casual invitations presents an opportunity for the relationship to grow into a caring one.

This process may not be as easy when it comes to reaching out on behalf of our family members. Many of us may have grown up with an expectation not to complain and to take care of things ourselves. We can be fiercely and justifiably proud of our self-sufficiency.

We may feel that extending even a casual invitation is risky. We worry that others will feel obliged—or worse—that they might be saying yes because they feel sorry for us, or for our family member. This worry speaks to how deeply many of us have been hurt by negative cultural stereotypes and stigma about disability. It makes us forget the gifts our family member has to offer. It makes us forget that others may indeed care.

Remember, we don't have to do the asking alone. Recognizing our fears and allowing someone to help us make an ask whether it's a personal connection we already trust, a paid facilitator, or direct support staff can significantly help reduce the stress of asking.

We need to remind ourselves of the beauty and richness that our family member has added to our lives and to the lives of those around them. We constantly hear stories from ordinary people attesting to how their relationship with their family member has brought meaning to their life. These are often people who wanted to reach out but did not know how. Each invitation we offer is an opportunity for others to extend their community and to broaden their relationships.

If you love
someone,
put their name
in a circle,
instead of
a heart,
because hearts
can break,
but circles
go on forever.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

OPENING In order for others to come into our lives, we need to open a place for them. It is impossible to meet people or deepen a friendship if we have no time to spend with them. This is an issue for many people with disabilities. Virtually all areas of their lives may be programmed. Our family member may be too scheduled for friends and acquaintances to spend time with them. Being at the same place at the same day and time each week can create familiarity that might develop into a relationship and then grow a friendship. We may need to give up a program or change schedules to create the space that would allow for others to engage with our family member.

On a more subtle level, some of our own actions might inhibit the involvement of others. Over the years we may have become used to doing many things for our family member. The presence of others changes our routines too. The involvement of somebody new might be unsettling and scary. Shouldn't we be doing it ourselves? That's guilt talking. We can do it better. What if they do it better? What will they think of us? That's letting fear do the talking for us. As we feel ourselves losing some control, we may resist or undermine the contributions of others. We need to ask ourselves honestly and courageously what we are willing to let go of, to make room for others to become active and involved in the lives of our family members.

When you really think about it, this process of letting go is our lifetime task. It is why you are reading this book. Friendships provide a catalyst to accomplish this task. Our family members grow richer from having experiences outside of their immediate family. Their friends can inspire and encourage them to participate and contribute to society.

Consider these 4 conditions that Janet Klees (2005) discussed which creates the likeliness that connection can form.

Place - Being in a typical and familiar space in community (where all the people are)

Presence - Where the person is present frequently, regularly and predictably (the effort that is needed to be out there)

Role - In a role that is familiar and well-suited to gifts and contribution this person can and wants to make (roles about purpose)

People - Within the appreciative presence of valued others (among people who have the capacity to see our family member's contribution and possibly enter into a supportive relationship).

Giving thought to these 4 areas, when we consider what makes for a good week or month with our family member and helping them to take action in this way, it's about OPENING. It is about understanding there are intentional ways we can create opportunities for friendship to form.

BELIEVING Of the three challenges, this may be the greatest. We worry that the distinctive traits or history of our family members may make them unlikeable—to everyone, that is, but us. We remember the absence of invitations to birthday parties or sleepovers. We notice—yet again—someone staring in the supermarket or we receive a look of pity from a passer-by. We feel hurt by these things, and we ache for our family member. Our overwhelming desire is to protect them. Sometimes, due to discrimination, barriers or ignorance that we have witnessed, it's hard to remember there can be a caring community of people available to befriend our family member. This lack of belief affects our ability to be open to others, and to trust in their integrity.

No disability can prevent a caring relationship from forming. No previous experience, no characteristic, no behaviour, not anything. We can look for proof in the hundreds of friendships that have formed through the people part of Personal Networks through PLAN. We can look to countless stories of connection that exist around the globe and right here in Ontario. But believing doesn't even require us to have this proof. It is a choice we make to believe in the possibilities. Believing isn't about blind optimism; it's about knowing the reality (yes there is the chance for rejection but also a chance for acceptance) and choosing to be hopeful about what the future might bring. It's about choosing hope, because the acts generated from our hopefulness might make more of a difference than if we had done nothing at all.

Despite the negative view of an uncaring society profiled regularly in the media, people do reach out to each other. The experience of people around the world bears this out. People are genuinely hospitable and eager to become part of our family member's life. Often, they just need to be asked. Our challenge as parents and families is to not let our fears dominate the opportunities for friendship.

Relationships and contribution

Relationships play an important role in enabling our loved ones to contribute and show their gifts. From the comfort and encouragement of supportive friends, family, and circle members, people with disabilities can find opportunities to work, volunteer, create, inspire, care, serve, and contribute.

Our family members make contributions in many ways. These contributions significantly enhance the chances of forming relationships, especially when they are thoughtfully planned. It's important to make sure they allow a person to be present consistently, with predictability and are among people who genuinely welcome or need the contribution and take place in everyday spaces where these people are. A talented artist who only paints for themselves is not increasing their chance at relationship but an artist who gets involved in their community to share their gift, where that gift is needed, creates a chance for friendship to blossom.

Your family member doesn't need to be an artist to make connection. Think broadly about the many ways people can make a unique contribution.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF DOING These are the action-oriented contributions we are most familiar with such as volunteering and working.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF BEING These are contributions made by the majesty of our family member's presence. Being present is an important way for our family members to make their contribution. The exchange can be understood as highlighting the importance of social connections and mutual sharing in personal and communal relationships. Our family members offer grace, caring, attentiveness, wonder, acceptance, silence, receptivity, compassion, inspiration, pleasure, gratitude, loyalty, and friendship. These gifts— often overlooked in our society—are critical to society's well-being. In fact, they are a necessary antidote to "too much doing."

Judith Snow wrote about the many gifts and assets that people who are marginalized often contribute to community (2015, p.39-40). These gifts, ranging from the generous gift of hospitality in making others feel welcome and happy, to more tangible economic gifts like providing a job to others, helps us shift our thinking about contribution. When we shift our thinking,

we are more open to seeing the broad range of assets our family member has. We can better appreciate the possibility and come to expect the kinds of reciprocal relationships we've been discussing.

Identifying the gifts and contributions of our family members can lead to meaningful relationships.

That's what friends are for

There is something about being human that makes us yearn for the company of others, to be with our family and friends. Isolation and loneliness can be devastating by-products of having a disability. The company of others can make your day better, feel like you belong, and can meaningfully support and fulfill a person's life. Friendship combats isolation and loneliness - both of which may be experienced by our family members who has a disability due to inaccessible spaces, needing a bit of extra help with social skills, or others' ignorance.

Loneliness can weigh even heavier when a person who has a disability is served by a large, impersonal service delivery system which has little time or resources to focus on friendships. The way to truly diminish this loneliness is by paying attention to caring relationships. Even though this may be challenging for both our family member and for us, it is critical for their future security and well-being.

No disability
precludes
relationships.

VICKIE CAMMACK

The key to creating these connections is first, our willingness to let them happen and second, our effort to make them happen. No amount of money can truly match the warmth of knowing that others care about you. That's what families do. That's what friends are for.

Significant contributions

Circle members make significant contributions because they:

- See the gifts and abilities of our family members
- Validate our family members by letting them know they are valued
- Help our family members develop their talents
- Create opportunities for our family members to make contributions

Written by Kathy Bromley, Parent

Take THAT, Shannon...

When it comes to disability, someone long ago decided that there should be another language. Words used such as “toileting” instead of bathroom, “integration” instead of attending class and, one of my favourites, “inclusion” when all we want is for our children is to have friends and achieve a sense of belonging.

Rob and I have worked hard to make sure that others see Shannon as an equal. But we can’t control how Shannon’s peers treat her on a daily basis. On the surface, nothing about Shannon seemed open and available to invite friends into her life. With all the equipment and staff attached to her, how can we create a natural environment for Shannon to make friends?

What we have found is that by modeling what we want for Shannon, by continuing to acknowledge her disability all the while sharing her abilities, Shannon has become just another high school student—one with peers, acquaintances and friends. Just one of the hundreds of Grade 12 students working hard to get to graduation.

Shannon has friends that take care of her just like they take care of their other friends. One day, for example, when Shannon showed up at school with her hair a little less than its usual stylish way, a fellow drama student stepped in, gently pulled the elastic out of her hair and had it fixed up

in no time. He didn’t ask. He just knew it needed to be done.

For years, Shannon has worn orthotics on her feet—black shoes that were difficult to put on and impossible to kick off. When Shan’s orthopedic surgeon suggested she need only wear her orthotics when she was standing, out went the old and in came the cute flats.

Shannon figured out how to get her flats off by wedging them against her wheelchair and flicking upwards. One morning while Shannon was at her early morning Yearbook Club, she flipped her shoe off one too many times and the shoe came flying right back at her! Shannon’s Special Ed Assistant wasn’t really sure what to make of witnessing another student picking up the shoe and throwing it right back at Shannon. I certainly knew how to react... with a smile.

There’s a level of politeness between people who see each other on a regular basis—people who haven’t spent enough time getting to know each other but know enough to compliment one another and be polite. This is not where friends stay; this is where a friendship begins.

To really know another person means that you can laugh, not just with them but at them as well, in a way that includes mutual respect. I think of the times my friends have

laughed at me when I've spilled food on myself or tripped on the sidewalk. Only good friends can get away with that.

Which brings me back to the girl in Yearbook Club who threw the shoe at Shannon. It wasn't a hard throw, more of a toss onto her lap accompanied by "keep your shoes to yourself Shannon!" Only a friend could get away with that behaviour. Yes, our daughter has peers, acquaintances, classmates and staff but she also has people in her circle who would gladly call her a friend and who treat her with the same caring respect and sense of humour as they would their other friends. This is where we want our daughter. This is what inclusion means.

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Worksheet 4

The Circle of Friendship

For some people, relationships with family and friends are what keep our lives on track. We have a whole range of relationships—family, partners, lifelong friends, work colleagues, neighbours, people with whom we share an interest, right through to people whom we pay to provide services.

For people with disabilities, these relationships are equally important but can sometimes be challenging to create.

We needn't leave friendships and relationships to chance. We can be really intentional and make it easier for people with disabilities to strengthen their community. We can do this by enabling people go to places where they can engage in existing or new interests, hobbies and passions, and could meet people who share these interests.

Use the relationship circles tool on the following pages to look at the people your family member already has in their life. It will help to map out their community as well. It can be completed one-to-one, or with family and friends, or even brought to a Circle meeting to complete as a group.

In the relationship mapping diagram, the concentric circles are used to plot out relationships. Authors, John O'Brien and Jack Pearpoint (2015) describes these circles as:

- The circle of **intimacy**
- The circle of **friendship**
- The circle of **participation**
- The circle of **exchange**

CIRCLE 1 The circle of intimacy is concerned with loving relationships and the anchors in your family member's life. In here, go the people your family member cannot imagine life without- typically, immediate family and chosen family. Your family member doesn't need to get along with them all the time!

CIRCLE 2 The circle of friendship is concerned with the friends and allies of your family member. Good questions to ask your family member are: Who do you call when you've got good news? Who do you vent with when you've had an argument with someone? Who do you draw strength from, share a laugh with, and share your dreams with?

CIRCLE 3 The circle of participation is concerned with shared interests and community connection. In here are people your relative knows from clubs, committees, work, and so on. NOTE This circle is particularly important because it is the building block for circles 2 and 1. The more connections made in this circle will increase the likelihood of building meaningful connections in circles 2 and 1.

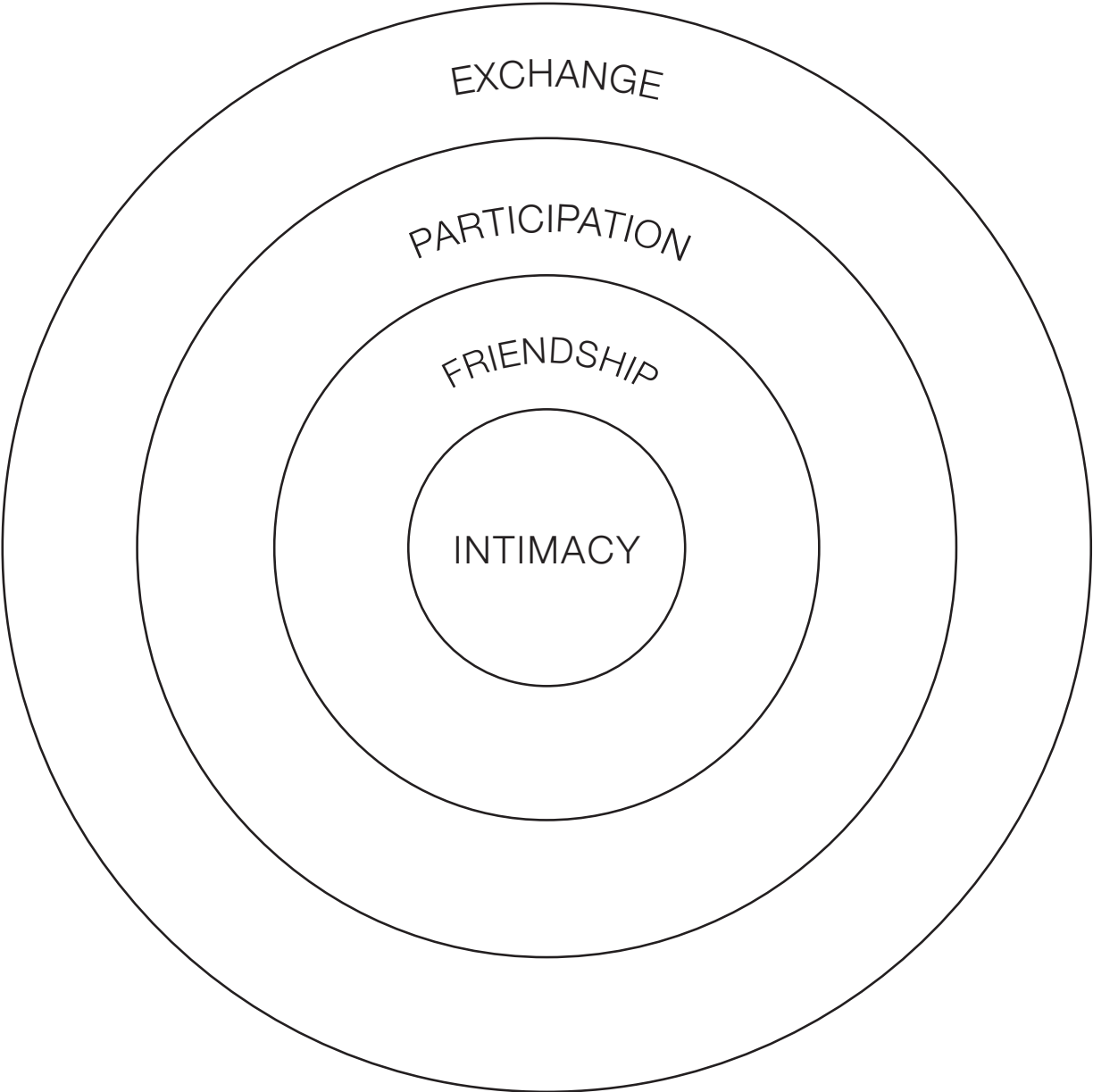
CIRCLE 4 The circle of economic exchange is concerned with paid relationships. In this circle are people like your family member's health care practitioner, dentist, and so on. What will emerge when your family member's diagram is complete is a picture of how their network is or isn't in balance. For example:

- Many people with disabilities have the same number as other citizens in Circle 1, but few in Circles 2 and 3 and markedly more in Circle 4
- Some people with disabilities spend most of their lives with people who are paid to spend time with them, that is, those in the outer circle

The main strategy for strengthening the inner circles is to bring people into Circle 3, the circle of participation. These are people who spend time sharing an activity of mutual interest—anything from working together, playing a sport, sharing an art or craft activity, to going out for a meal together or going to the theatre. To take this a step further, also consider how we ensure that participation in the things that matter to us happens with predictability and purpose. Through participation in consistent ways, people become friends over time. We also know that people don't come straight into Circle 2, the circle of friendship. Friendship doesn't happen instantly.

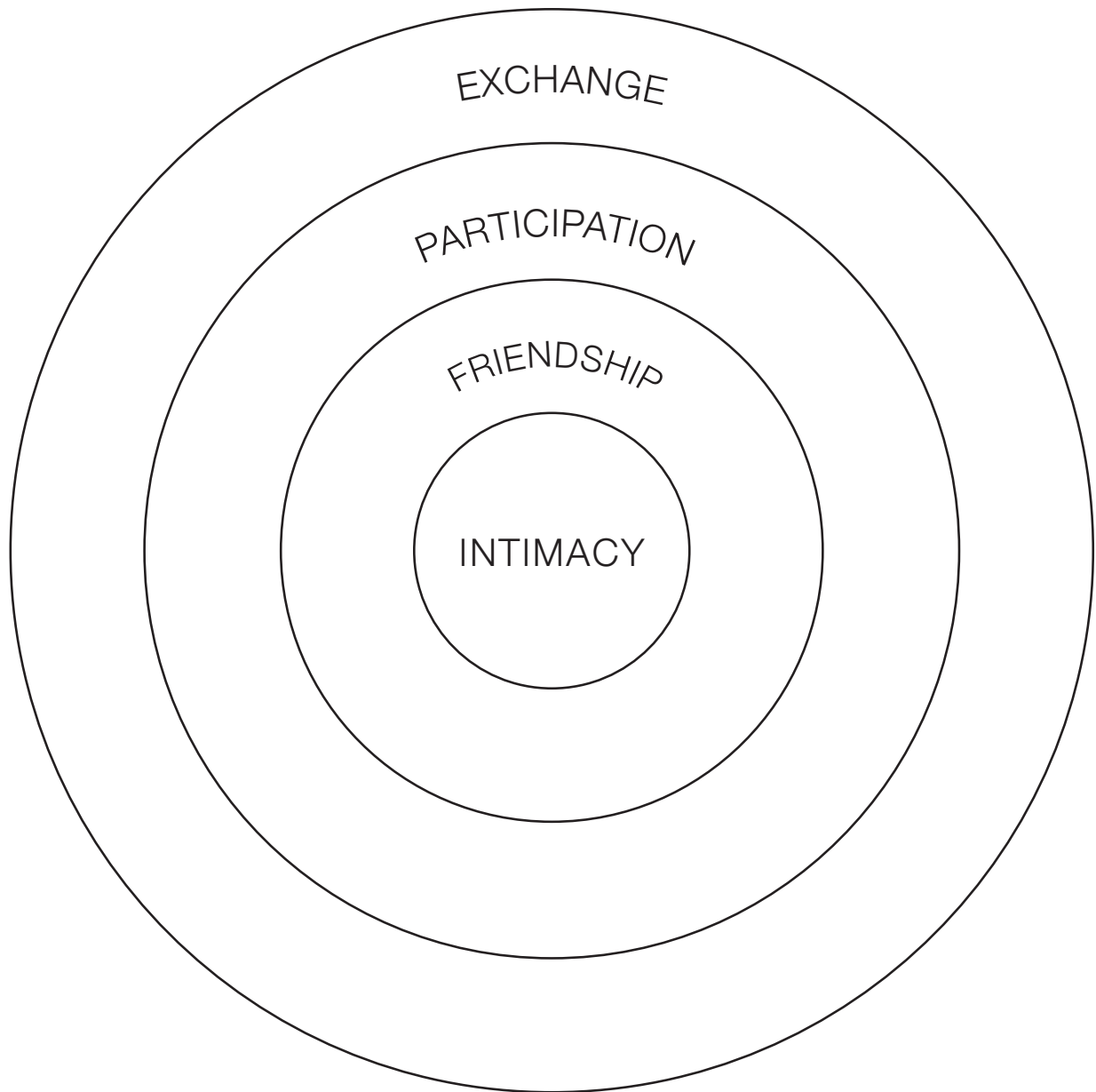
Explore **planningnetwork.ca** for additional resources on Nurturing Friendship.

Sample relationship circle



O'Brien, J. & Pearpoint, J. (2015)

Your family member's circle



O'Brien, J. & Pearpoint, J. (2015)

Worksheet 5

Contribution

The following questions may help you identify the various ways your family member makes or could make a contribution.

We suggest you answer these questions and then share them with your family member and others who know them well.

What contribution does your family member make to your family?

What are the three activities they love the most?

What are their passions or special interests?

What gives them the greatest joy and pleasure?

Who are their heroes?

What famous public personality (singer, actor, athlete) do they like?

What would they like to learn?

What could they teach others?

What have you learned from them?

What positive attributes do others like about them?

What is the greatest accomplishment of their life so far?

What job or volunteer position would best suit their interests and personality?

Do they currently have a job or volunteer? Explain where they work or volunteer

What are their duties and how often do they work / volunteer?

Do they go to school? Explain where they go to school.

What have they learned at school?

Do they go to any groups, teams or clubs? Explain what the group, team or club is about.

What do they like about this group, team or club?

What have they learned from this group, team or club?

What do they bring to this group, team or club?

Worksheet 6

Spirituality

Those who have a religion or spiritual world view may use this worksheet to reflect on the things that make a good spiritual life for their family member with a disability. Faith communities can provide a starting point for building relationships or networks. Whether we practice spirituality formally or informally, the human spirit always needs to be nurtured.

We hope this worksheet will help put the pieces together to answer the question, "Who will ensure that the beliefs that our family member has developed over the years are continued when we are no longer around?"

Is going to a place of worship important to your family member? _____

How often do they like to go? _____

Do they need support to get there? What does that support look like? _____

Where is that place? _____

Who is the main contact person? _____

Name and contact details _____

Is there any other organization connected with their faith that they wish to be a part of? _____

Do they need support to do this? _____

Who is the main contact person? _____

Name and contact details? _____

Does your relative's spiritual belief system involve any special dietary requirements? _____

If so, please explain. _____

Are there daily habits, for example prayer at mealtime, that are important to your family member?

What kind of support is needed to make this happen? _____

Are there any icons or pictures that should be with your family member, either in their house or carried or worn by them to keep their faith alive? _____

Are there any special days or festivals that should be celebrated? _____

How should this be done? _____

Is there anything else about your family member's spiritual belief system that should be noted? _____

Is there anything needed to make communication easier at the place of worship? _____

Is your family member accepted by the other worshippers? _____

Is anything needed to make full participation easier, for example, a loop system, large print books,
and so on? _____

Are there any physical barriers that prevent full participation? _____

Connected to spirituality, are there any particular traditions your family member would want as part
of their own funeral? _____

Are these instructions written down somewhere? _____
