

# Building a Circle of Support

Circles of Support consist of a group of individuals coming together to create, promote, and support goals for a loved one with a disability. In this group, people work together to share ideas and activities to best support their loved one and help them to have a positive, meaningful life.

Circles of Support are **voluntary** and **intentional**. This means that individuals in the group are committed to their loved one by choice. These groups are rooted in humans' instinctual need for connection and relationship, which is particularly important for an individual with disabilities. The relationships in Circles should be reciprocal, meaning there is a give and take between each member of the group; each member contributes to the support of the loved one in a unique way. These groups provide a support system for loved ones so they can turn to them to ask for advice, seek guidance during a crisis, and overall support for daily living needs and life goals. The format of a Circle of Support is unique to each group depending on the needs of their loved one. *All Circles of Support should be person-centered, with the needs of the loved one at the center of each meeting.*

## Why should you start a Circle of Support?

What Circles do:

- Center on support for a loved one with a disability
- Community building
- Engagement in the care of another's life
- Idea-sharing and brainstorming
- Sharing the load of planning for a loved one's care
- Increased safety
- Gain insight from individuals with different life experiences

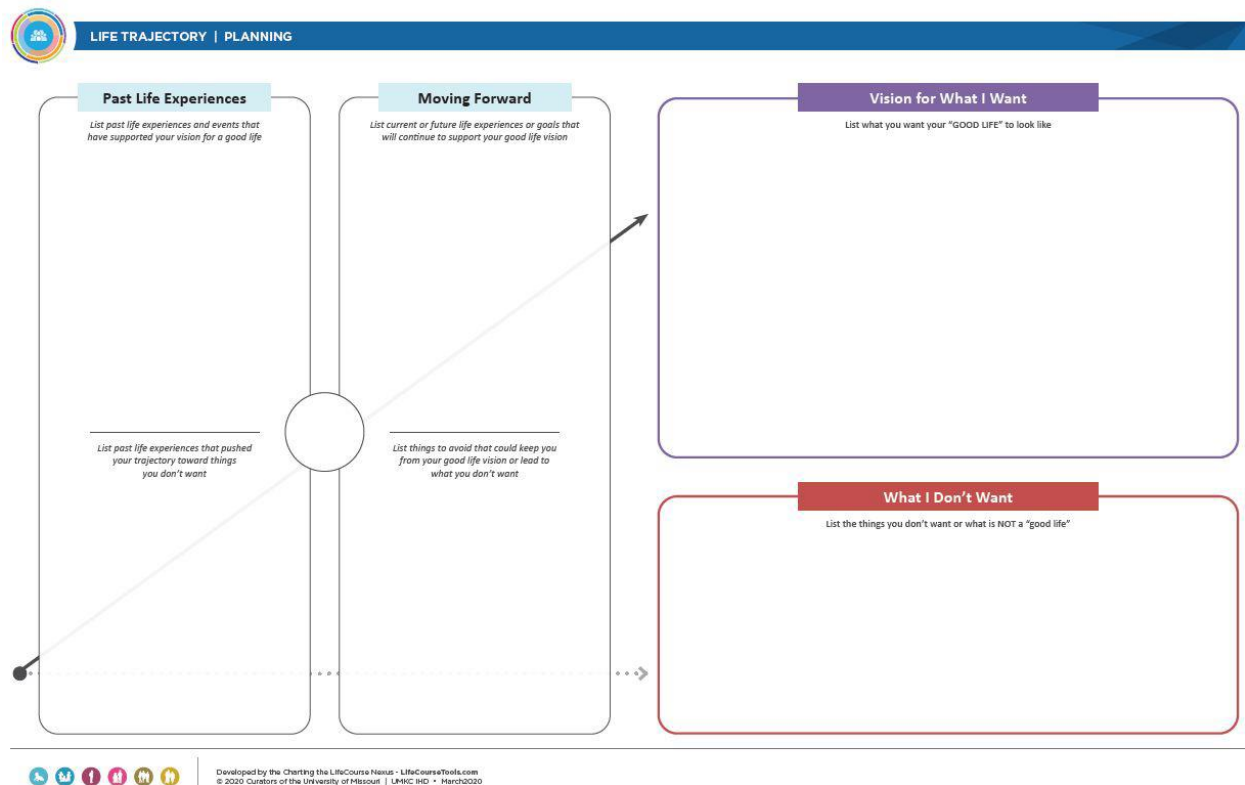
What Circles do **NOT** do:

- Center on support for the parents/family member of the loved one
- Replace familial connection and support
- Care for the loved one on a daily basis

*Follow this guide to begin thinking about establishing your Circle of Support. You'll brainstorm who to ask, how to ask, and how to plan for group meetings.*

# Step 1: Clarify Your Vision for the Future

Understanding where you see your family member in the future can help you craft a compelling story for those who will be engaged in your circle. Whether you dream of an inclusive future with friends or a future job, that picture in your head will help you identify the people you need to make it happen and the roles they might fill. A trajectory can be a good way to identify that desirable future and what you don't want! [Insert link](#)



# Step 2: Who to Involve in Your Circle

When first thinking about formulating your Circle of Support, it can be challenging to imagine people other than yourself providing care for your loved one. This is okay. It is important to acknowledge this and be honest with yourself and your loved one to better understand what their goals and priorities are. Think about what your loved one's life goals are, then think about certain individuals who can best assist your loved one in working towards those goals.

Begin by sitting down on your own and brainstorming people who would be strong additions to your loved one's circle. Who are your close family members who you trust to support your loved one? Starting with immediate family is a good baseline. Next, think about close friends, community members, and eventually paid professionals (accountants, nurses, etc.) who can

provide a different kind of support than you. Who can be the teacher, the friend, the coach, or the laundry assistant? Any person of any age can be included in your loved one's support network.

**Activity: Mapping Relationships** Use this form to identify who the people are that care for and care about your family member with a disability. Ask them to join you in identifying people that are important to them, that honor their routines and know their story. Reflect on the finished document for opportunities to ask for specific help or to fill gaps in your map.



## MAPPING RELATIONSHIPS

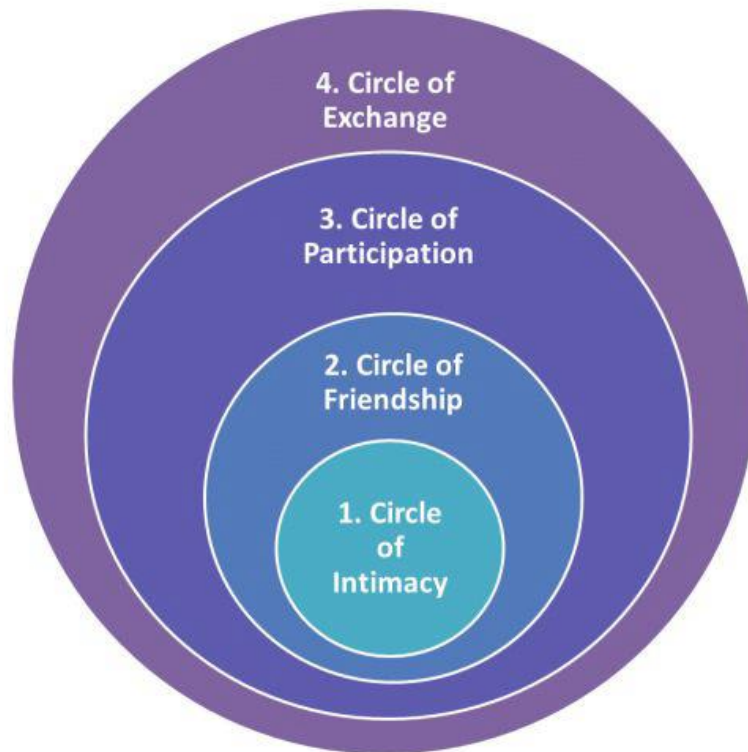
CARING ABOUT	Who serves in this role now?	Looking Ahead	Next Steps
Shares Love, Affection and Trust			
Spends Time and Creates Memories Together			
Knows about Personal Interest, Traditions, Cultures			

CARING FOR	Who serves in this role now?	Looking Ahead	Next Steps
Supports Day-to-Day Needs			
Ensures Material and Financial Needs are Met			
Connects to Meaningful Relationships and Roles			
Advocates and Supports Life Decisions			



Developed by the Charting the LifeCourse Nexus - [LifeCourseTools.com](http://LifeCourseTools.com)  
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**Circles of Belonging:** Use this web to begin thinking about potential members of your loved one's Circle. After filling it out yourself, talk with your loved one about who *they* want in their Circle. Their views of supportive individuals may be different than your own, and it's important to remember that this Circle is meant to have your loved one at the center.



## Step 3: How to Ask for Support

The next step is to ask for support. This may not be an easy task. Again, vulnerability can be a challenge! Asking does not need to be anything extravagant.

Asking can be as simple as seeing someone at a sports event, talking to them about your loved one's goals, then asking if they would be willing to help. More often than not, people who are asked to be involved are honored that you and your loved one trust them. If you prefer, you could send out invitations to ask people to join your Circle of Support. Here, you can include information about your loved one, what their goals are, and how this specific person would be a good addition to the Circle. They will likely be flattered that you and your loved one value your relationship with them to involve them in your loved one's life.

If you ask someone to join and they decline, that is okay, too. Be gracious with yourself and the other individual. Try not to let this disrupt your current relationship with them. They may come back to you later to offer support once they feel more able to do so.

**Activity:** Use the space below to think about how, when, and where you can ask individuals to join your Circle. Be sure to be mindful of where people are at in their own lives—they may be less likely to respond or less likely to want to get involved if they are going through a period of stress.

Think about who you see regularly and may be able to speak to in person, and others whom you see less often and might be better accessed via call or mail.

Person to ask:	Where do I see them?	How often do I see them?	Best way to ask for support:

## Step 3: Planning a Circle Meeting

After gathering your Circle of Support, the next step is to determine what conversations will look like, and what group expectations will be. Do you plan to meet with your Circle once a month with all members present? Will you meet with members individually on a “every once in a while” basis? Think about how often you need to meet with your Circle of Support in order to help your loved one achieve their goals. It is possible that some meetings will need to be more formal and frequent in the beginning stages while you all work together to create a team flow. As time goes on and your loved one’s goals change, meetings may be less frequent or formal.

**Activity:** Use the space below to plan your first Circle of Support Meeting. At this meeting, it is good to have all members present in order to establish group expectations, roles, and future plans. Begin the meeting by introducing members to each other (if they don’t know each other already), and introduce your loved one. *Your loved one should be as involved as they can be in these meetings.* Come into the meeting with clear expectations for the Circle. How often will you meet? Who is assigned to different roles? How should your loved one be treated? Make sure all members have a clear idea of their next steps.

Finish the prompts with your meeting plans. Be sure to close the meeting by expressing gratitude towards your Circle members. You are all working together to build a community of support for your loved one!

**Introductions:**

**About my loved one:**

**My loved one's goals:**

**Expectations for the Circle of Support:**

**Tasks for each member:**

**Expression of gratitude:**

**Next meeting date:**

*Content created using resources from <https://www.ric.org.au/assets/Uploads/circles-of-support/fc67c032b4/Circles-of-Support-Manual-2019.pdf>*

*For access to all of the Charting the LifeCourse Foundational Tools, go to <https://www.lifecoursetools.com/lifecourse-library/foundational-tools/>*

## **Other Resources**

Creating a Financial Circle of Support - <https://www.ablenrc.org/manage-account/building-a-circle-of-support/>

Person Centered Planning - <https://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/01/11/circle-of-friends-a-type-of-person-centered-planning/>