

The questions and answers in this handout are from the webinar held by the Think College National Coordinating Center, presented by Janice Fialka and Emma Fialka-Feldman. To access the recording of the webinar: <https://thinkcollege.net/resource/person-centered-planning/intentional-inclusion-cultivating-circles-of-support-webinar>

Do you ever talk to the Circle beforehand and influence what they tell Micah? Do people in any or all of the Circles ever come together to meet without Micah to think together about his goals, concerns, etc.?

Over the years, there have been different ways that the Circle has supported Micah, especially during difficult and challenging times. In elementary school, Micah's Circle was started (with Micah and his parents' permission, of course) in partnership with school support staff. Conversations were held between parents of children in Micah's classroom.

At times, teachers would approach Micah's parents with concerns (e.g., students seem to be frustrated when Micah touches them to get their attention) or students in his Circle would bring up issues (e.g., Micah goes to dances but hangs out with the teachers instead of dancing with his peers). Micah's parents would encourage the individual to talk to Micah or connect with the Circle facilitator to help organize the conversation at an upcoming Circle meeting. Sometimes conversations prior to talking with Micah were helpful so that individuals could think through what they wanted to say. People often need and appreciate finding the best ways to formulate or articulate their thoughts.

As various medical needs have arisen, Micah would share these concerns with his parents. His parents would ask if it was okay to talk/email/meet with his live-in care staff, support staff, or case manager. Micah sometimes needed to figure out how to talk about concerns or worries he might have. Sometimes a Circle meeting was necessary. Sometimes a conversation with a member of the Circle would be sufficient in addressing the probe.

Informal conversations with one or two people where we explore thoughts can help clarify issues, provide validation, or even "give the words" to know what to say or how to say it in the Circle.

From Janice (Micah's mom): "Sometimes it has been helpful for a member of the Circle to talk through some awkward or uncomfortable issues with me (or me with them) prior to raising it in the Circle or with Micah directly. Informal conversations with one or two people where we explore thoughts can help clarify issues, provide validation, or even "give the words" to know what to say or how to say it in the Circle or with Micah. The intent of these so-called "side" conversations is not to "hide" anything or to go behind Micah's back. The intent is to strengthen insight and pay attention to thoughts and feelings. Although these types of talks didn't happen frequently, they were often indicative of things that weren't being addressed but needed to be discussed. The bottom line is that often there is a tendency to not talk about things that feel uncomfortable, when in reality those are the very moments or issues that are critically important and when discussed in respectful ways can enhance communication and build relationships.

You mentioned Micah creating a new Circle of Support so he could be interdependent. Can you talk a little about the difference between interdependence and independence?

Often in the disability community, there is emphasis on building someone's independence. To be independent is to manage one's life completely on one's own, without input or support from others. While having skills to do certain things independently is fine, in our family we have stressed interdependence, which recognizes that for some things, having support or guidance from others is a good thing, or even necessary. Seeking support isn't bad. In fact, it is necessary for spiritual, emotional and physical survival. If we shame 'help,' we take away the power that individuals, particularly, individuals with disabilities need to thrive. Helping Micah become interdependent, and advocate for interdependence rather than independence, makes way for his Circle of Support to be an essential part of his life and enhances his ability to seek support.

Do Circle members teach non-Circle peers about the ways they learned to interact with Micah?

Over time, Micah's relationships with his Circle members have evolved. Starting in Middle School, Micah began attending disability youth-leadership gatherings. He began learning about his identity, his story, and his pride as a disabled person. He began making PowerPoint Presentations to share with his school staff about his identity and he would talk about the role of Circles in his life. Eventually some members of his circle would join him for presentations and talk about the impact of the Circle on their lives.

Circle members definitely played a role in advocating both for Micah and for others with and without disabilities. They were often the teachers in a sense as evidenced when they noticed other students avoided talking to someone with a disability or seemed uncertain about how to interact with someone with a disability. Some of them became informal leaders in stopping bullying, not just of Micah but of anyone.

Is there a worry that kids will sign up to be a circle member just for the fun and not for the well-being of their peer?

We say – whatever gets someone to join is okay. We never know what relationships will flourish into life-long friendship. There are examples of people who joined Micah's Circle because their parents told them they had to. There are examples of people who joined to complete hours for a service project and years later invited Micah to their wedding. There are examples of people who joined and flowed in and out of the Circle and then eventually nominated Micah to be on the High School Homecoming Court. There are examples of people who joined the circle

In middle school one of the members of the Circle noticed that a new student from another country didn't have many friends. He spoke limited English. He suggested to the Circle, that the new student be invited into the Circle. This is a perfect example of the greater "lesson" of the circle, to notice what others might need and reach out to them.

and went to one or two meetings and then did nothing more. We don't know what relationships will stick. We do know that invitations for the most part must be intentional.

What resources are available to individuals, families, and educators to assist them in starting Circles?

SocialJusticeBooks.org is a wonderful resource with reviews from educators about topical books. They have a page with books for children about disability.

Here's another great resource titled, "12 stereotype-busting children's books starring characters with a disability." www.rebekahgienapp.com/disability/

The organizers of Inclusion Press have developed Inclusion, a curated a wide-ranging collection of articles, videos, books that summarize both the evolution and practice of inclusion, including *All My Life's A Circle-- Using the Tools: Circles, MAPS & Paths*.

The book, *Building Circles of Support and Friendship* by Jan Burke-Gaffney, was suggested by Janice during the webinar. You can contact the author at: jan.bltn@gmail.com.

Can a parent be the Facilitator? Or is it better if someone else takes that role?

Each Circle can explore who might be the best person to facilitate. In our experience as Micah's parents, we did not want this role, nor did we think we would be effective. Some of the key ingredients of a good facilitator include: strong listening skills, organized, good at engaging people, strong commitment to high expectations and honoring the gifts of all people.

Have you used technology to do a Circle of Support Meeting virtually?

Yes! In previous circles, we had some members "Zoom" (video conference).

Is the facilitator an official role? Or how do you source a facilitator?

We believe Circles are best when there is an assigned facilitator or co-facilitators. As an adult, Micah often co-facilitates which means that he and the other person prepare for the upcoming Circle by identifying dates, agenda, and talking about what is going well and what might need more focus. Preparation and reflection (before and after the meeting) are important.

Be creative about who might be willing to facilitate: In school, it could be any staff member, a social worker, a speech therapist, or a teacher. Beyond the school setting, a family might hire a social worker or counselor. Some Circles are facilitated by counselor, a faith-based clergy, rabbi, or cleric.

What happens if there is a sudden change in the plan? (e.g., focus person decides not to do the vocational rehabilitation program or decides he or she no longer wants to live near the campus)? How does the Circle help? How does the Circle change if the individual's location changes?

Some issues that come up will take more time to discuss and resolve, than others. One point I will make is that Circles evolve over time, depending on location, the interest and current priorities of the focus person, and his or her situation. This issue of changing locations and how to manage that could be an excellent conversation with the focus person and the Circle which may occur over several meetings, and perhaps special guests are invited to participate in meetings on specific topics.

What strategies have you found to be helpful in growing the second ring of the Circle (the Circle of Participation)?

We are constantly thinking about WHO can be part of the circle. We often ask ourselves and nudge Micah to think about: Who are you beginning to spend time with? Who have you noticed in similar settings as you? What could they be doing? How can we support those first few interactions? Who might you invite into the Circle who has interests, talents or hobbies that would be new to Micah and could expand his interests?

Many need nudging to start participating in an intentional way. Often we say, "People won't come if they are not invited." Other agencies and groups including the LifeCourse Tools (<https://www.lifecoursetools.com/>) think about 10 buckets to help broaden who were are including in our circles. These buckets are: Employment, Independent Living, Safety & Security, Social & Spiritual Growth, Advocacy & Citizenship, and Healthy Living. This may be helpful guidance to start in thinking about WHO to invite into the Circle.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

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