

Natural Supports

Caring for and about other people and having other people care for and about us is what makes our lives meaningful. Many people who receive services have lost touch with or never developed relationships with people who are not paid to be with them. Organizations can intentionally assist people in building relationships with people they already know or can facilitate meeting new people in order to create new relationships.

Quality in Practice

- Recognize that our connections with other people who love and care for us are central to our well-being.
- Believe that everyone can have relationships with people who are not paid to be there.
- Understand that successful relationships are reciprocal – both parties benefit from the relationship. Reciprocity can take many forms, but both parties must feel connected to the other.
- Assure that reciprocity occurs:
 - support people to recognize and celebrate significant events in the lives of family members and friends
 - assist people to send cards for birthdays, anniversaries and holidays
 - share accomplishments so that family members and friends can celebrate together
 - offer to help with things that are happening in other people's lives, rather than expecting help in one direction only
- Listen to what people are interested in and support them to meet other people who are interested in the same things. Every community has a host of groups that people can join – walking clubs, travel groups, sports teams, support groups – the list is virtually endless. Support people to join in these events and look for natural connections that begin to emerge.
- Support people to volunteer in their community around something that excites them – helping to build a house for Habitat for Humanity, working in the soup kitchen, planting a community garden, etc. Watch for natural connections and support relationships to develop.
- Make sure that when people do join the activities of a group that they become a member of the group. If there are dues to pay, pay them (even if reduced because of their financial situation); if there is a membership list, make sure the person's name is on it; if members carry ID cards, make sure the person has one.
- Friendship often begins when one person invites another person to do something – share a cup of coffee, see a movie, go to an event. Support people to invite people they meet to do something together; don't wait for someone else to ask first.
- Remember that relationships often take time to develop so don't give up on something after one or two tries. Being present for a long time may be necessary for relationships to develop.
- In supporting people, assure that their disability – whatever it may be – is secondary to who the person is.
 - “This is Jane. She loves animals, dogs especially, and she wants to walk the dogs at the local animal shelter. Yes, she uses a wheelchair, but don't worry, it is electric and she can operate it with one hand, so she can hold the leash with the other. Do you have any other questions, Jane and I can answer for you? Jane has used a wheelchair all her life and she is comfortable talking about it.”
- Be extremely respectful when talking about a person you support with community members. Assure that you are always sharing that person's gifts and contributions as a community member, rather than asking for charity for a recipient of some service.
- Make sure that people are known for the social role they hold, not the disability they live with.
 - “This is Joan, a volunteer at the soup kitchen” or “This is Keith, an employee at Ace Hardware” or “This is Peter, an artist who paints with watercolors”.
 - The social roles of volunteer and employee and artist are much more relevant than the fact that Joan and Keith and Peter have disabilities.

Natural Supports (continued)

- Support relationships within families and make sure to include extended family members, even if they live far away. Writing, emailing or phone calls are all easy ways to stay in touch. Long distance relationships can be very fulfilling and may offer a travel destination someday.
- Be creative when thinking about how to support relationships for people who do not speak in traditional ways. Think about creating a web page or a newsletter that can be the avenue for sharing information on a regular basis. Create a photo album that a person can share with others to help them get to know each other. Assist community members in becoming comfortable to talk with someone who uses a communication device or signs or communicates with eye contact and body language.
- Support staff to recognize when relationships are developing and teach them ways to maintain those relationships.