

FRIENDSHIP CORNER

*(Widening the Circle recommends Person Centered Planning (PCP) as one of the best ways to insure that attention is paid to relationships and friendships in the lives of people with disabilities. But, for various reasons, not everyone can access PCP. However, many adults with disabilities are required to have an Individual Support Plan (ISP). This planning process, if used correctly, can contribute to social connections for the individual, including the possibility of friendships between people with and without disabilities. Our thanks to **Robin Harmatz** of DDS for contributing the following information on how to use the ISP to make connections and friendships.)*

How to Use the ISP to Promote Connections and Friendships

Relationships are a fundamental need for everyone. They bring richness to our lives, provide opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute, and give support to one another through times of joy and sorrow. Through relationships, we add to the life of our communities and enrich the world. People who receive services through DDS are no different but they do, often, experience challenges in establishing and maintaining relationships. Some of these challenges are specific to the person but many times external factors contribute to difficulties for the person to form and maintain relationships. For example, when individuals move, they may lose touch with old friends and have trouble figuring out how to make new ones. They may not be as close to a favorite sibling as they used to be, and have moved away from the faith community where they served a valued role in the choir. They may be experiencing health challenges that make it more difficult to access the community, or lack the social skills needed to connect easily with others. The bus route they used to visit their best friend may have changed, and they need to learn a new route. The ISP provides the framework to address all of these issues, and to support people to develop and maintain a rich variety of relationships and friendships in their lives. Relationships include family members, paid staff and others receiving services. Just as importantly, it includes friendships with unpaid peers in the community who are not family members or other individuals receiving services.

The Vision Statement of the ISP reflects principles of Person Centered Planning and provides the framework for efforts on behalf of the individual, including the means to promote, establish, and maintain relationships. It is the area where the Department encourages individuals to dream beyond the confines of service provision.

The Vision Statement is developed by answering 4 key questions:

1. *What does (s) he identify as important activities and relationships to continue to be involved in? What other things would (s) he like to explore?*
2. *What does (s) he think someone needs to know in order to provide effective supports?*
3. *What does (s) he think are his/her strengths and abilities?*
4. *What would (s) he like to see happen in his/her life over the next two years?*

The first question focuses immediately on relationships that are important to the person. Supporters should go on a “treasure hunt” to identify and record every detail of the person’s current and previous social network as well as identifying the activities the person enjoys with the goal of maintaining them to the greatest degree possible through changing life circumstances. It also provides an opportunity for the person to dream of new activities and relationships to explore in the future.

The second question offers the person the opportunity to identify what helps them the most and what gets in the way. This is often a question that is difficult for people to answer, but perseverance in identifying the person’s preferences in how they receive support will encourage success in addressing goals for the future. Things to pay attention to are the individual’s rhythms and routines, what types of environments are most comfortable, whether they need time to feel out a new situation or are the type to jump into a new experience with excitement. Get to know what is the best “fit” for the individual.

The third question provides information on how the person perceives their skills. By focusing in on relationships in addressing this question, supporters may identify hidden opportunities or obstacles to relationship. For example, a quiet person may describe himself as shy, but it also makes him a good listener, something he might not highlight. Someone else may identify herself as a good friend, but doesn’t always make note of important events in her friends’ lives. Identifying conflicts between an individual’s self-perception and actual abilities will strengthen the team’s efforts in promoting relationships.

The fourth question tells the ISP Team what is most important to work on now, and what the person’s goals for the future are. The individual should be supported to be specific about what they want out of life, especially in the realm of relationships and community connections. Do they want to re-connect with old friends? Establish a romantic relationship? Learn how to ride a bicycle? Have greater independence? Encourage people to imagine the life of their dreams!

Whatever the person’s goals, they are likely to have a connection to relationships or create opportunities to expand social connections, and we would expect those connections to be included in some way in nearly all ISP Objectives, not be isolated to a single Objective targeting friendship. Learning to ride a bicycle can lead to a biking buddy, gaining independence leads to mutually supportive relationships with neighbors. This is where the ISP Team’s creativity comes in. Details in each of the 4 Vision questions will provide the unique picture of who the person is, what they want out of life, what resources they have to draw on, and how the ISP Team can best support them to achieve their goals. If there are missing pieces to this puzzle, assessments and consultation that are developed as part of the ISP can provide assistance in filling in the gaps and helping to hone in on the stepping stones and strategies that will support the person to achieve the life they have imagined, one that is rich in those people and communities that are important to them.

To assure that relationships become integrated into your ISP, contact your DDS Service Coordinator before your next ISP and let them know this is an important topic that needs to be included and that you would like to meet to talk about it.

For more information contact Robin Harmatz at robin.harmatz@massmail.state.ma.us