

Connecting People

The steps to making it happen

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Foundation for People
with Learning Disabilities

CONNECTING PEOPLE: THE STEPS TO MAKING IT HAPPEN

Acknowledgments from the Editors

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The use of this symbol  throughout the book indicates related content on the companion DVD.

FOREWORD

People with higher support needs have been the last to benefit from the transformation of services for people with learning disabilities in the last few years. Despite often requiring expensive packages of support, this group are frequently offered services which are outdated and delivered in congregate, buildings-based and segregated settings. We are often told that segregated services are the 'best' or only option for them and we hear many excuses why they cannot be more included in their communities.

Almost a decade into the twenty-first century and eight years on from Valuing People, it is scandalous that this group of people are effectively treated as second-class citizens. We welcome the commitments made in Valuing People Now to address this problem and earnestly hope that policy is swiftly translated into effective practice. Yet here is the rub: despite the numerous books, DVD's, powerpoint presentations and training manuals about 'community capacity building' we are still asked 'how can we make it happen?'

Life In The Community has been all about finding answers to this question. The experiences of four organisations helped us understand the barriers they face in building a community life for people with high support needs. They also helped us explore what makes things happen, what good support looks like and how people without specialist skills, knowledge or experience of learning disability have an important role to play in helping people achieve their ambitions. .

Above all, the project reinforced something that we already know well, but that is often overlooked: 'community' is founded upon relationships rather than a place or an activity. So we found that while places and activities are the arenas in which relationships often develop and flourish, most of the good outcomes for people taking part in the project - finding work, moving home, joining clubs, setting up a neighbourhood service - were invariably by-products of the new relationships they forged. Yet this definition of community was rarely recognised or stated as a goal of the publicly funded support for those individuals. We have therefore written a briefing for people who purchase services (commissioners and care managers) about some of the findings from the Life In The Community project (available from our website at www.learningdisabilities.org.uk).

One of the messages we want to get across to commissioners and care managers is that 'community connectors' played a vital role in people achieving those good outcomes. Community connecting fills a gap that often exists between person-centred planning and the achievement of good outcomes for people by matching their skills, interests, aspirations and dreams with opportunities in their local communities. Community connectors proved very effective at establishing sustainable relationships between individuals, members of a community and community organisations, as well as mentoring direct support staff to work in more creative and flexible ways.

If the project has demonstrated that people with learning disabilities and high support needs can have better lives in the community, this book provides some ideas about how to make it happen.

1. CONNECTING PEOPLE

Why connect people?

If I had to name one thing that would make the biggest difference to the life chances of people with a learning disability it would be good relationships. Not just good relationships with people paid to be in their lives but a network of good relationships with people *not* paid to be in their lives.

Grapevine started connecting people with learning disabilities to other people in their communities five years ago and there were two reasons why we found focusing on supporting good relationships with non-paid people was crucial.

The first and most obvious was their isolation. One of the things we do is provide crisis advocacy. Often the same people return to us again and again and the one thing we never have time to resolve is their isolation from others; they have no friends, no workmates, and no neighbours who know them. The 'crisis' in 'crisis advocacy' is always about isolation, not debt, not harassment from neighbours, not rent arrears. It is isolation, which makes people vulnerable to the crises they present to us. They do not have the network of relationships that might provide aid and support at times of difficulty. The ice under their feet is thin.

Secondly, we noticed that most support services, including our own, were relying on paid staff to support people's presence in a community. Like us, they often headed for community facilities such as shopping centres or leisure centres. But these are places you go to with a friend, not places you go to in order to make a friend. This way of working sees community as a place you go to, not as an experience of relationships. It is rarely backed up by detailed knowledge of communities and what they can offer, relying instead on the presence of paid support staff which creates dependence on the service in order to 'have a life'.

We decided we wanted to focus not on the use of community facilities, but on building relationships that would leave people with stronger and richer lives than before.

Building relationships - why does it matter?

It matters because a freely given relationship is the most valuable experience we can have. It quite literally keeps us healthy and happy in a way nothing else can. It makes us the people we become. If our relationships are artificially restricted to people and places we have not chosen, and over which we have little control, we cannot expect to grow as a person.

It matters because relationships – their depth and variety – are what keep us genuinely safe and independent. If you ask anyone what keeps them safe or independent they are unlikely to say, "My ability to parallel park", "I can use the microwave" or "Efficient assessment and record keeping". Instead they will describe how their partner is good at the things they're not so good at; "You can put my wife down in any town and she can always find her way to where she wants to go. I'm lost".

They'll say having friends and family to turn to in times of trouble; "Keeping me safe are the people who love and care for me and people I know I could call on at 3am in a crisis and they would come running". Or, "My neighbours are brilliant - we don't go into each other's houses but I know that if I was stuck I could knock on their door and that helps me feel safe as I live on my own. I know they keep an eye on me and I do it for them".



Andy and Natalie at Caribbean Night.

They would say someone who knows them really well who always sees through their 'mask' and notices when something's wrong; "My best friend won't even ask what's wrong, she'll just be there, waiting for when I'm ready to talk about stuff".

They'll say knowing people who can give them practical help and do favours; "I wouldn't last five minutes without support from my family up the road. Whether it's fetching my washing in on a rainy day, picking up parcels, cooking my tea when I need it. I wouldn't know what to do without them".

People not involved in a service life are describing how inter-dependence is what keeps them 'independent'. Inter-dependence is about two-way relationships where you each offer something of value to the other.

They are also describing how they feel protected from harm when they have close friends they trust and a wider network of people they can turn to for help or advice. Genuine protection for people with learning disabilities is no different. We believe that when people are isolated they are at more risk from neglect, abuse or attack. All of us are safer when people know us and care for us. When we help people with learning disabilities to get connected to other people in communities we are helping them to be safer by increasing the number of people who know and potentially care about them. The development of genuine independence then has to be about people with learning disabilities getting support to have relationships of that kind.

"Connecting can be very difficult; you can feel deflated when things don't work, or you don't receive the reception you were hoping for. It is important to remain focussed and remember that it just takes one person in the right place at the right time to open many doors and fight down the barriers."

Natalie Peters, Community Connections Worker, Grapevine

Think about yourself at 18. Do you know more people now than you did then? The answer is invariably 'yes'. Think about someone with a learning disability you support. Do you suppose they know more people now than they did at the age of 18? The answer is probably 'no'. People with learning disabilities experience a reversal of that natural process of knowing more people as you grow older. Aren't people with a learning disability more at risk as a result?

We know the people who live on the thin ice. They're the ones who use our services, our crisis advocacy, our daily living support and our adult protection measures. If all we do is give people the surface features of independence and protection, we condemn them to spending their lives there, denying them the opportunity to stand on the firm ground of relationships built up over a lifetime.

These guidelines describe our journey to engage ordinary people to care about, respect and enjoy knowing someone with a learning disability. They also describe some of what we have learned along the way which we hope will be useful to others.

Do this before that... getting the basics right first

What follows is intended for both managers of services and support workers. It is not a 'toolkit'. Toolkits can encourage people to think that they need only follow a model or set of actions. They can also make people scared to deviate from the model for fear of 'getting it wrong'. That is not helpful. Instead, an organisation wishing to involve people with learning disabilities in their community and make new relationships must first think deeply about its culture. They also need to be guided by imagination and creativity. Tools are only as good as the gardener using them and the soil he or she gardens in.

The A to D's needed

A. A culture of permission

If, as a manager, you want support staff to genuinely share power with the person they support, and to see them as a capable person whose strengths and passions are needed, then you have to approach your staff in the same way.

Managers should share power with supporters by:

- encouraging the individual strengths and creativity of team members and allowing them to use these in their work
- not requiring staff to seek approval (usually layers of approval) before they can act or make a decision
- helping staff to figure out the best way to do their work rather than giving them instructions and rigid templates
- always being approachable and supportive so that staff don't end up feeling abandoned rather than empowered
- making it easier for them to make mistakes sometimes and take reasonable risks.

B. A set of beliefs for all staff

Everyone is ready! None of us should have to go on a course, pass a test or meet a set of criteria before we can enjoy an ordinary life. This is a 'must- have' belief for anyone wanting to help people connect to others.

All staff need to believe in each person's capacity to contribute, to offer something that is wanted if they are to help them forge new relationships. We all have some 'deficits', the things we either can't do or are not very good at doing, and some 'assets', the things we either can do or are good at doing. The essence of community is mutual exchange and shared experience, so focusing solely on what someone hasn't got or can't do is unlikely be a successful way of building relationships.

People do not need to be 'fixed'. Only support needs fixing for inclusion to be possible. We all share the same fundamental needs for giving and receiving love and friendship, for contributing and being valued. We all share a capacity for experiencing them.

C. The right relationships between the supporter and the supported

The quality of the relationship between staff and those they serve has to be right. In this sense, the right relationship is based on:

- warmth and solidarity, it is not over-protective
- 'you know what is best for you', not, 'I know what is best for you'
- enjoyment of each other's company, not cold and task-centred with a focus on paperwork.

A useful exercise is to stand behind the person you support and imagine what it is like looking through his or her eyes. What do you see and hear? Do you like it? Is it good enough for you or someone you love? Thus, the right relationship is marked out by the quality of attention the supporter gives those they support. In a good relationship a supporter has the ability simply to be with someone and get attuned to them. In time they will know what someone is interested in and what it is that makes them interesting to others.

D. The natural connectors

The natural connectors do not need obvious or verbal direction. They can, from their deep attention to who the person is and who they might become, spot the right people and the best opportunities for them. If however, you see yourself as a teacher to the person you support, rather than their student, then this isn't for you.

Good connectors must be open to reflecting on themselves and what needs or personal constraints they may be bringing to their work. For example someone who has a few deep relationships may not be an effective connector of other people because it is not something they do very often in their own life. On the other hand, if they make relationships easily and are confident about making new ones it will be easier because they will have had lots of practice.

Managers should consider what else the supporter experiences in their own life. He or she needs to have good support networks and routines for themselves in order to support others well. This is especially important when we remember that this work may be new and challenging for both them and the person with a learning disability. It puts pressure on both to be competent and confident in new places with new people.

A natural connector is good at understanding why someone behaves in the way they do and how to respond positively. Getting examples of others' experience of supporting people with learning disabilities to develop positive relationships was very helpful. It enabled us to develop better approaches to people whose difficult behaviour we now understood were fuelled by anxiety and stress. This was particularly helpful to us with two people we worked with who had autism and a learning disability.

Good connectors also need to be confident enough to make good judgments about what is working and worth persisting with and what isn't. When we first discovered that one of Desrick's passions was music, Natalie, his supporter, and he went along to a gospel choir. They were invited to sit down and were then just left on their own – it was a large room, with lots of people. Everybody knew each other and was practising songs that they had obviously been rehearsing for quite some time. As the staff member Natalie felt totally isolated. Nobody made an effort to talk to her and Des, nobody introduced themselves, asked who they were or showed them the songs they were singing. This left Des and Natalie feeling anxious and uncomfortable. To add to this, the whole session seemed to last for hours and it was a relief when it had finished. It was obvious that Des and Natalie would not be going back.

On the other hand, sometimes it is just a case of needing more time. Gerard and Natalie went to an exercise class at which most people were friendly and welcoming. Some were a little unsure, but that was okay. They were given paper plates to use as part of the exercise. Peggy, the class leader, no doubt in an attempt to include him, pretended to hide behind her plate before making a "BO" sound at Gerard. A man of 44, he thought this was very strange! However Natalie sensed that this was still a "good place" with the right type of people. Two years later Gerard and Peggy are great friends, and Peggy knows Gerard the person, not the label. Upon reflection she would probably feel embarrassed about what she did when she first met Gerard.



Gerard and friend.

A note to managers

For these reasons, it is wise for managers to help staff to develop and use their own judgment, their empathy and their creativity. Managers should also bear in mind that some supporters find that easier than others. So try to make the right match between the supporter and the qualities needed for connecting people.

Not all supporters have to be connectors. We have assumed so far that most organisations will want their supporters to be connectors. However, at Grapevine we employed people to work purely as connectors and then withdraw once a connection was made. In the case of people with high support needs, we worked with the paid staff in that person's life to sustain an opportunity we had started. They did not need to have all the qualities I've described above. However, we noticed that sustaining opportunities with support staff worked best where there was genuine liking for the person supported, a warm relationship of solidarity and a good match of personalities.

"When thinking of doing anything in building communities, think small, think face-to-face."

John McKnight

Getting the right things in place

- Keep it small and personal. High volume work with a lot of individuals is less effective at getting to the root of a person's talents and abilities
- Allow other people to communicate a sense of possibility about a person you support – allow their notions of 'what might be' to grow and take hold. Don't let your ego or sense of 'territory' stand in the way of growth for that person
- Accept that you as a professional don't always know best. Instead collaborate with others to do the best you can for the person you serve
- Confront your everyday assumptions and practices and allow others to do so or nothing will change
- Keep your line of management as flat as possible so that you can more easily identify and respond to people who won't co-operate with the connecting work
- See investing in change for one person as a creative effort that could change things for more people in the long run. Don't see it as special treatment, but an investment in learning how to do it right
- Do all you can to assist efforts for a person to pursue what they care about – their interests, hobbies and relationships
- Always be ready to be flexible around timetables and rules. Routines should serve the person not the other way around.

Taking risks

Organisations need to be prepared to think about risk in a new way. That doesn't mean not thinking about risk at all. There are practical steps we can take when including people in communities to keep them safe:

- At Grapevine, when we connect a person we support with someone new we make sure there is someone available for them to talk to. If the person feels uncomfortable or is unhappy, listen to them. Just because we have set something up, that does not mean it has to continue forever or that it is perfect. If the person is not happy, stop and try something new or connect them with someone else
- We ensure that we arrange initial meetings with new people in places where there are other people around

- We show that we care about the person and respect them. People who are seen to be known, loved and respected are less likely to be targeted as a victim
- We believe it is just as important to remember the risks to someone's well being of NOT doing something they want to do.

Risk is part of life for everyone, so it is not a question of whether there is a risk in doing something, but rather is this something worth taking a risk for?

Formal risk assessments will not normally be necessary but where we consider that they are, we think about the following:

- What is it that you or the person wants to do?
- What are the benefits to the person?
- What are the consequences of *not* doing it?
- What could go wrong?
- How likely is it that something could go wrong?
- How easy is it to anticipate or prevent something going wrong?
- What would the consequences be?
- How can we reduce risk by working with what we know of the likelihood, prevention, anticipation or consequence of something going wrong?

Anoop's Story

Anoop, a man in his thirties with high support needs, went to college and stayed at home. He had no life outside the family circle. Darren observed Anoop's gifts – being kind-hearted, talkative and having an appetite for life – and worked with him to use these gifts to enjoy fresh opportunities.



He appreciates good coffee and together they sampled all types of coffee from macchiato to lattes in cafe's from small and independent to busy chains in bookstores, all over Coventry and Birmingham. Darren discovered that Anoop was an eager sports fan but did not go to any games or take part. To gauge his interests Anoop experienced different sports from football to ice hockey.

He started to attend Coventry & North Warwickshire Hockey Club where at first he watched practice sessions and spoke to players. Darren got to know the club's organiser, Simon and spent time with him. Simon both understood what Darren was trying to achieve and could see a mutually beneficial role for Anoop to play in the club.

Two years on Anoop is photographer for the club's website and organiser of the zone (wheelchair) hockey section. He is a popular regular at the clubhouse.



2. THE HOW DO WE DO IT

The 'how do we do it' guidelines below will work best with organisations and staff who have worked on Getting the Basics Right First as described above.

I. Know what community connecting looks like

When Natalie first started to work with Desrick nobody knew much about him and he rarely spoke. He had no family who were in touch and he had recently left the home he shared with an older couple that were retiring to the West Indies. He had been placed in a residential home, taking his possessions with him in three black bin bags. The only people Desrick knew were those paid to ensure he was clean, in good clothes and had food to eat. Some of the questions we sought to answer first were: what is the quality of Desrick's life beyond his basic needs? What is there beyond the work-based relationships at his home?



Desrick and friend at the steel band.

We learned one of Desrick's passions is music – vibrant steel band style. Now Desrick's percussive abilities are being used at the weekly practice sessions of one of Coventry's leading West Indian bands. Desrick is making friends and they in turn are part of his circle of support. People are knowing him through his passion for music. One person in particular is starting to deepen her understanding of who Des is. Band members are starting to ask questions about where he lives and how. They notice when he doesn't turn up.



II. Getting to know someone

It may seem obvious, but the first step in any relationship is getting to know the other person properly. Ask permission to spend time with them and figure out the times of day and places the person is most likely to enjoy. Gradually be with them at different times or places and during different activities (or none). Doing a variety of activities is a good way of getting to know someone and learn more about them. It

gives you the opportunity to identify the qualities of a person more naturally, rather than just sitting down talking about them. You could go to the cinema, go for lunch, go for drinks in a café, walk around the park, go to shows and events that may interest the person, visit the person at home and watch TV with them, buy a magazine and read it together over coffee. All of these give you a chance to see the person feeling relaxed, and hopefully enjoying themselves. It is also a chance to see what doesn't work for a person, giving you indications of what to avoid in the future.

Look and listen out for interests, passions and dreams that are about relationships. For example, Mary and Natalie spent lots of time talking about the things she liked, but it wasn't until they went for a walk in the park, and she spoke to every dog walker they passed that Natalie realised how much she loves dogs. It is important to remember that people may not always be able to instruct you or make direct requests. With Des for example, it was a case of noticing how very alive he looked while enjoying the steel band and acting on the hunch that going to rehearsals would be valued by him.

Often people will show you by their behaviour what works for them and what doesn't. When John retired from his day centre he didn't want to be left with nothing to do in the day; he wanted to be busy and meet new people. A wood work group for the over 50's looked welcoming, and seemed a good opportunity for John to meet people of a similar age in similar circumstances to him, i.e. newly retired. John agreed and we arranged to go. We went along but John wasn't talking to anyone very much, and looked uncomfortable. His supporter, Natalie knew it wasn't the right place for John and, although she didn't know the reason, it was obvious it wasn't going to work. It wasn't until after several meetings with John that he finally said that he didn't like to get his hands dirty.

You may need to make a leap of faith, as Natalie was forced to do during her first few encounters with Mary. Mary is, on the surface, very loud, forceful and clear about what she wants, some would say, even 'rude'. She would often pretend to be asleep when Natalie came to spend time with her or she would refuse to leave the day centre. She then moved onto saying she would go out and then change her mind at the last minute. No amount of coaxing seemed to work. But Mary showed in small ways that she appreciated Natalie's visits. Natalie sometimes took magazines or photographs with her and would look through them while Mary pretended to be asleep.

Natalie takes up the story; 'She would slowly open one eye and look, we would start to talk, and then as soon as she realised we were having a conversation and she had let some barriers down, she would immediately close her eyes and tell me to leave. I knew deep down how much Mary did want to come out with me. Every so often she would let her guard down, and when I was leaving, despite her hardly saying two words to me, and sometimes being quite rude, she would ask when I would be coming back again. These were all signs to show that she did want to be involved, but at her own pace.'

After 5 weeks of Natalie spending time with her, Mary agreed to have lunch at a garden centre. Mary is still testing her control over the situation, saying sometimes that she will not go out, but Natalie knows what it takes to encourage her to come. Mary now has her own ideas about what she would like to do next time, and says that she doesn't need to get back to the day centre until the end of the day (a roundabout way of saying she doesn't want to go back until then). A lot of patient understanding of the less than obvious anxiety Mary must have been experiencing was needed. If her refusals had been accepted at face value Mary would never have gone on to go out weekly with Natalie and plan future activities as a way to meet new friends.



Ann visiting her neighbours.



Steven with the Canley wardens.

III. Use gifts and passions

People's gifts and passions are always the starting point for this work. A gift doesn't have to be an exceptional talent that only a few people have. It can just be the qualities that would be missed if the person wasn't there; a smile, a joke, a presence. A passion can be anything that makes you feel alive and gives you a burst of energy. Noticing where and when someone's energy is strongest is a good clue to their passions – both positive and negative. Steven was passionate about the police and policing. His passion was called - negatively – an obsession and seen as a problem by some. Actually it was the key to friendships. It gave a clear focus for our search and provided us with energy and motivation. People are best able to try new experiences and succeed at forming new relationships when they are relaxed and their mood is positive, so use precisely those settings and activities that people enjoy most as a gateway to community.



Building on someone's gifts and passions allows them to be known for who they are and not just for their learning disability label. We found an outlet for Steven's passion about both policing and Canley, the part of Coventry he lives in, by supporting him to meet Tony and Paul, the local street wardens. They were very welcoming, and seemed to get on really well with Steven. After a long session of pounding the streets with them, the chaps invited Steven into the office for a hot drink. It was obvious how much Steven had enjoyed his time with them and now they all meet weekly checking on the shop keepers, some elderly residents, fly tipping spots, empty houses and generally having a visible presence in the area. As Steven began to be recognised and saw the same familiar faces each week, the more he grew in confidence. The local neighbourhood would not normally have known Steven who, until then, spent all his time in a day centre, nor would they have gone out of their way to cross the road and chat to him as they do now. Getting involved in patrolling his neighbourhood helped people see who Steven really is, not just the label he has been given.

IV. Find out what's out there

Connectors can use their own networks of family, friends, acquaintances, and workmates as the starting point. Ask yourself, who do I know already who is part of that community? And what can I find out from them?

You can map a community using some of the many community mapping resources available. Other things we at Grapevine have tried include:

- competitions at summer and seasonal festivals in the various local areas
- street interviews - asking local people at different times of day about how they spend their time, what they do in groups, or what matters to people in their area. We asked local news reporters how they would go about this as they tend to be good at getting to know their 'patch'
- internet research - can be very useful
- organising a mapping event. Hire a local café and advertise it – the 'connected' people will come because they are interested in their neighbourhood. There is huge potential in getting people who are well connected together and finding out everything they know.

V. Use members of the community as your guides

You can enlist the help of individual community members to guide you around their world. It was local people with similar interests who helped us to connect Marie to live music events, Steven to his interest in his local area and all things 'police', and Anoop to hockey. 'Guides' like these know a lot about a community and the people in it, whether it is a neighbourhood or a community of shared interests, and typically, they are well known and trusted. Ideally, they can help you figure out where someone's passions and interests are needed, know who you should talk to and they may even do it for you. They are not necessarily people with leadership status like chairs of residents' associations. They could be lollipop ladies, traffic wardens, the people who deliver free papers, the local librarian or shopkeepers. They should understand about gifts, see possibilities and believe communities are welcoming.

VI. Use community groups

Discover the formal organisations, groups, and clubs (scouts, neighbourhood watch, residents associations, etc.) and informal gatherings that may not have a name or be constituted (friendship groups, sewing circles, quiz night

groups etc). Most organisations are open to newcomers if they have got the same interest – but the ‘get in’ will be harder without the commonality. So think carefully about this and consider the stages of belonging to a formal group – what you have to do to ‘get in’ (e.g. signing up, paying membership, getting to know the organiser) as well as how members ‘stay in’ (e.g. taking on a small role, noticing the unspoken rules and routines of the group).

VII. Use your agency

Your agency can also support people to take the initiative in building community by starting something up and then asking others to join in. For example, nobody who lived nearby noticed Ann; no one talked to her or acknowledged her. We supported Ann to start a magazine swap, in her neighbourhood. Now people stop and greet her, stop their cars to say hello, and even call in for a chat and a cup of tea. A neighbour, Beryl, drops off books and magazines at Ann’s home and the magazine swap has, by popular demand, become a regular feature in her neighbourhood. We learned that when you support someone to be an instigator of community, make it hospitable and keep the person at the centre so that relationships can develop naturally.

Other ideas might include starting a communal orchard and organising ‘apple days’, or getting an allotment and throwing a summer barbeque for the other allotment-holders.



Ann swapping magazines with her neighbours.

VIII. Build a circle of friends/support around someone

Many people with a learning disability do not have natural friendships with people not paid to be in their lives. In these situations it may be necessary for a connector to bring together a ‘circle of support’ made up of those the person knows and likes best. For example, Natalie supported Des and helped him to build a circle of support made up of two of his support workers who liked him, her partner, Bev and her daughter from the steel band. Natalie then helped Des to draw on the support of circle members to help find him find more opportunities to develop relationships, sustain them and to help solve problems when they arose.

There are books you can read and training courses available on circles of support. But, it really does not have to be hard. We simply gathered together a small group of people who knew and liked Des and felt an affinity for him (e.g. not knowing Des but being the partner of someone who does with roots in the same Caribbean island). The meetings were not meetings but social gatherings with a purpose: to think about Des’s life and offer practical help.

IX. Use third places

‘Third places’ simply refers to associations or connections between people that are based in locations like cafe’s. A ‘third place’ is a place of belonging, somewhere that is comfortable and where conversation is the main activity. It is a home away from home, a place where you can become known without doing much. You come as you are. There are regulars who might have privileges and your aim, as a supporter, is to help the person become a regular. Therefore it is important to go at predictable times - this works well for people who enjoy routine. We have

learned that this method of connecting cannot be used casually and support to do it has to be active. You need to spot opportunities for interaction, conversations and building relationships through mutual exchange; minding someone's bag, helping with deliveries, saving a seat for a certain time, whatever works!

For all of the approaches described above to work, a supporter should present a positive image of the person and what their future might be, not what the person lacks or needs. For example, when Natalie was helping John, who had left a day centre to retire, she compared his situation to that of any other retired person who still wanted routine and to be involved with people. She did not focus on his learning disability or his displayed challenges as a response to a loss of routines. She supported him to get involved in things that other 'retired' people were involved in. He now volunteers and goes to a local café where other retired men 'hang out'.

X. Be positive

It is important to learn to tell people's stories in a way which has been agreed with them and which is positive and truthful. When we do that, we should not use the vocabulary of 'service land', full of words that tend to be cold, remote and impersonal. We should talk respectfully and in real, human, everyday terms.

So how do we talk about things that will be seen as negative by others? How can we just not mention a learning disability? How can we just not mention poor hygiene? These things will be obvious on meeting so aren't we being dishonest rather than positive?

We have learned to tell the person's individual story with those 'negatives' emerging as extra barriers the person has to face – not 'he has poor hygiene' but 'he depends on others to help with care of his hygiene'; not 'he has a learning disability' but 'other people's attitudes to his disability are holding him back'.

We also advise to be yourself, not a worker. When Emily, a supporter, was helping Lisa join an aqua-fit class close to her home the receptionist said, "It's nice to see friends supporting each other". She had noticed that many times people come with their support workers, who don't actually work out together and don't seem to have a friendly relationship. She found Emily and Lisa's relationship refreshing. People can tell if you're just doing this because it's your job. A lack of passion shows.

Our credibility as the connector out in a community is not based on our professional credentials but on who we are as people. We see the person with a learning disability as interesting and likable, we care about their present and their future, and we are trustworthy. People can tell if we are good connectors.

3. TIPS AND RESOURCES

Tips for connectors on asking

You are more likely to get a positive response if you:

- Talk and behave positively about the person you support
- Talk in real everyday terms and don't use lifeless service jargon
- Ask for or offer a piece of practical help
- Ask if the person can join in something already happening that requires no new effort
- Make it mutual – we are 'hard-wired' to return favours
- Ask for small and specific things. Gaining a small commitment makes it easier to gain a large one
- Just ask for advice or knowledge at first 'do you know someone who might...?'
- Mention someone or something you have in common
- Listen for the reasons why people say 'no' and prepare for that next time
- Talk to people about why they are unable to help; unravel it with them
- You do not always have to ask directly. Instead try turning your approach into an invitation; e.g., 'Can you imagine Des ever going on one of your tours abroad?' not 'Can Des come with you on your next tour abroad?' This will allow someone to consider a request without feeling challenged by it.

You are now ready to get started

Now that you have finished reading the 'How Do We Do It' section you are ready to try out developing the role of community connector. Here are some things that worked for us when we were getting started.

- Identify someone, preferably a pair of people, in a staff team who have the gift of easy warmth with others. Ask them to organise a mapping event
- Start small; perhaps supporting just one or two people, preferably ones who have a good person-centred plan that describes their aspirations for an ordinary life
- If you can't find people who already have a plan, start with someone who has a really obvious passionate interest and use that as a hook into community
- Map your own team members' skills, interests, passions and dislikes. See if you can match them at least some of the time to someone you support. Use the 'matched time' together to be learning about how the person could get connected to a community
- Don't put pressure on people to get results too quickly. Treat it as experimental if that helps free everyone up.

Resources to help you on your way

Publications:

Green, M. Moore H. & O'Brien, J. (2008) ABCD in Action: When people care enough to act. Inclusion Press. Toronto.

Mills, L & Messinger, G. (2005) Sharing Community: Strategies, tips and lessons learned from experiences of community building at Options. Atwood Publishing.

Kennedy, J. Sanderson, H. & Wilson, H. (2002) Friendship and Community: Practical strategies for making connections in community. North West Training & Development Team.

McKnight, J. (1995) The Careless Society – Community and it's Counterfeits. Basic Books, New York, New York

Lockhart, A. & Clarke, M. (2004) Community Lost and Found: A conversation between two dreamers. Inclusion Press. Toronto.

Ludlum, C. (2002) One Candle Power. Inclusion Press. Toronto.

Burke, C. (2006) Building Community through Circles of Friends. Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities.

Wolfensburger, W. (1998) A Brief Introduction to Social Role Valorization, 3rd edition. Syracuse University.

Pitonyak, D. (2007) The Importance of Belonging. Imagine.

Snow, Judith, A. (1998) What's Really Worth Doing and How to Do It. Inclusion Press. Toronto.

Pearpoint, J. (1998) From Behind the Piano. Inclusion Press. Toronto.

Websites:

Inclusion Press and Network: www.inclusion.com

International Association for Inclusive Citizenship: www.uoguelph.ca/oaar/iaic-snow

National Community Building Network: www.idealists.org

Communitas: www.communitas.org

Imagine: www.dimagine.com

Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities: www.learningdisabilities.org.uk

Valuing People: www.valuingpeople.gov.uk

In Control: www.in-control.org.uk

Grapevine: www.grapevinecovandwarks.org

ABCD Organising: <http://www.mike-green.org/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Wightman is Director of Grapevine, a charity working in Coventry and Warwickshire. She has established a reputation for expertise in making the changes needed to enable people with learning disabilities be more fully included in their communities.

Clare has been inspired by the early pioneers of person-centred planning and citizen advocacy from Canada and the United States.

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About the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

We promote the rights, quality of life and opportunities of people with learning disabilities and their families. We do this by working with people with learning disabilities, their families and those who support them to:

- do research and develop projects that promote social inclusion and citizenship
- support local communities and services to include people with learning disabilities
- make practical improvements in services for people with learning disabilities
- spread knowledge and information.

If you would like to find out more about our work, please contact us:

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