



SELF-STUDY GUIDE: NATURAL SUPPORTS

Unit I: What are Natural Supports?

Natural supports are the relationships we all have every day in our lives – unpaid, informal, ordinary relationships. They include family members, neighbors, teachers, church members, co-workers, friends, housemates, classmates, club members, etc.

Supports are vital in helping to promote the development of a happy and healthy life for anybody.



Typical Relationships in Our Lives are Formed Through...

1) **Emotional Attachment:**

Our family and close friends, the people whom we have significant relationships with, are often the ones whom we feel we can count on to be there for us, and in return we are there for them. We are emotionally connected and feel close to these individuals.

2) **Common Interest:**

People whom we generally are involved with due to our participation in a particular activity, club, workplace, school, church, or live in the same area.

3) **Economic Exchange:**

Those folks we interact with because they provide a service to us and are paid to do so. These individuals may include doctors, librarians, bank tellers, yoga instructors, hair stylists, professional caregivers, etc.

Natural Supports generally refer to unpaid relationships. However, these relationships *may* develop out of paid services or interactions. Relationships do evolve and change over time.

- We all want meaningful, satisfying, quality-enriched lives. In order to achieve that, we need other people, a support system or network, to help us.
- Through our life experiences, people develop supportive relationships. These relationships have little structure; they do not teach skills or prompt individuals to work on their goals. They do not *do for*, but rather they **do with** the individual.
- The person's natural support network is there to provide nurturing and encouragement, which will serve to only enhance his or her skills and competencies as a human being.
- Natural supports are based widely on the individual's unique interests, needs and preferences.



Points to Consider:

- ✓ People with disabilities may have lives which are primarily filled with people providing economic exchange, and at times are lacking in natural supports. Some are left vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation.
- ✓ Advocating for a higher quality of life for the people we serve includes placing focus on true participation and involvement in the community, by which the development of natural supports would follow.
(Get people involved in church activities, work, self-determination groups, volunteer opportunities, events at parks and recreation, neighborhood groups, etc)
- ✓ It is frequently through shared activities that new relationships are formed. Creating opportunities where a person can contribute, reciprocate and belong, such as common interest groups, clubs, schools, work, etc. is vital for developing genuine natural supports.



Scenario:

Vivian adores animals and enjoyed going to the local pet store where for hours she would watch the cats and dogs, finding such pleasure and fulfillment in them. The store owner would let her pet the animals and help feed them, which was an absolute thrill for her and she took the responsibility very seriously.

Her support worker started taking her to the local Humane Society to volunteer twice a month. The staff was impressed with how well Vivian interacted with the animals, so they requested that she volunteer one day per week. Vivian now goes without her support worker and has developed friendships with the other volunteers and staff at the animal shelter. She recently had a birthday, and her friends there got her a cake and balloons and sang to her.

Unit II: The Value of Natural Supports

Many believe that one of the most basic yet vital needs that people have is to be connected to others, to be engaged in *meaningful relationships* with our fellow human beings.

In a study completed by O'Brien & Mount in 2007, it was suggested that to have a full and meaningful life we must have these five valued experiences and accomplishments:

- Belonging
- Being respected
- Sharing ordinary places
- Contributing, and
- Choosing

Every single one of these experiences and accomplishments involves relationships with other people.



Research Has Also Shown:

- Social relationships contribute to the overall wellbeing of people, reducing the likelihood of mental illness, physical illness and premature death
- Social relationships positively influence our sense of personal control
- People who have few advocates in their lives need their paid supporters to assist them in finding meaningful relationships

Other Benefits of Having Natural Supports Include:

- ✓ Having a support system promotes independence and acceptance while providing solutions to problems when needed
- ✓ Natural supports are people's "safety nets" when life doesn't go as planned
- ✓ They serve as a learning tool to support the individual's overall growth and development



Think About It

Some of the causes of boredom or unhappiness in people with disabilities is because....

- They are seldom welcome in places where their gifts are noticed or valued
- In social relationships, some may lack the experience in how to date, be a neighbor, co-worker, "just one of the guys", etc.
- Many have learned that the only way to be seen is to be needy. In these situations, many of their relationships fail because it is not "two-sided", it only meets the needs of the one individual.

As John O'Brien once said, "It is dispiriting to always be the needy one". Our souls are deprived of the chance to make a difference to others.

Unit III: The Circle of Support Model



1) **First Circle: The Circle of INTIMACY**

List the people who you cannot imagine living without

2) **Second Circle: The Circle of FRIENDSHIP**

List those who are good friends (almost made it to the first circle)

3) **Third Circle: The Circle of PARTICIPATION**

List people, organizations, clubs, networks, groups, etc. that you are involved with (Co-workers, church choir, craft club, neighborhood group, etc.)

4) **Fourth Circle: The Circle of EXCHANGE**

List those that you pay to provide services in your life (Teachers, hair stylists, medical professionals, pet groomers, etc.)

*Note: People can be in more than one circle. For example, your hair stylist may also be a good friend.

The Circle of Support is a powerful tool to help build a community of natural supports around the people we serve. A strategy with the circle is to build from the outside inward.

Unit IV: The Principles of Self-Determination

Self-Determination is a fundamental right that empowers people to live responsible lives. It means to have authority over how their lives will be lived, where and with whom, have control over the resources needed for their support, and have responsibility for their decisions and actions. It means to have freedom.

The Basic Principles of Self-Determination:

1) Freedom:

The ability for individuals with freely chosen family and friends to plan a life with necessary support

2) Authority:

The ability for a person with a disability, with a social support network or circle if needed, to control a certain sum of money

3) Support:

The arranging of resources and staff – both paid and unpaid – that will assist an individual with a disability to live a life in the community, both actively contributing to the community and actively engaging with people in the community

4) Responsibility:

The acceptance of having a valued role in the community through such experiences as employment, organizational affiliations, and spiritual development. This also includes being responsible for using funding dollars in ways that are life-enhancing for persons with disabilities.



Putting the Principles in Action:

✓ **Dignity and Respect:**

All people have the right to be treated with dignity and to be respected as a whole being with regard to mind, body and spirit. Most of life's greatest lessons are learned when we make choices that we later realize were mistakes. All people have the right to the dignity of risk. *The individual's network of support makes risk possible by assuring safety and encouraging growth.*

✓ **Self-Determination is Not Abandonment:**

There are limits to the level of risk society will allow people to take with their own lives and physical well being. It is not acceptable to offer a choice of either excessive restrictions or no support at all. *Self-determination involves becoming more creative in helping people find ways to learn decision-making skills and manage their actions.*

✓ **Relationships:**

Supporting people in developing and maintaining relationships is an ongoing process. Those with whom the person has meaningful relationships provide strength, assistance and security, nurturing his or her overall well-being. Therefore, those relationships must be cherished and handled with care.

✓ **Choice:**

People have the right to choose what they do with their lives, where and with whom. When people need help, it's friends and close family members who can assist them in broadening their experiences and exercising their right to make choices and decisions. *A circle of support ensures the individual's freedom of choice because those people will be advocating for him or her.*

✓ **Control:**

Individuals have the power to make decisions and control their own lives, including their resources and finances. If support must be purchased, the people buying it, with assistance from their natural supports when necessary, will determine which supports will be purchased and when. People must have control over hiring those who will be providing a service to them. The Customer is in charge of the service they are paying for.

✓ **Goals and Dreams:**

Every person has hopes and aspirations for their future; that is what motivates us in life. *A commitment to helping people create their dreams, respecting their dreams and assisting them in coming true is a crucial part in playing a support role on a team.*

✓ **Contribution and Community:**

Everyone has the ability to contribute to their community in a meaningful way. Giving of ourselves helps us to establish a sense of belonging and identity. Community membership includes having the opportunity to be truly involved in the routines of the community and to make a difference in the lives of others.



✓ **Whatever It Takes!**

The attitude that nothing is impossible is required when advocating for the people we serve. As long as the choices the person makes are legal and safety is not an issue, we must replace “We can’t” with “How *can* we make this happen?”

Those who work in the natural support system for the individual learn to destroy the barriers that get in the way of making dreams come true.



Unit V: Helping Build Community Connections

Quite often, support staff are the link or “connector” of people with disabilities to their communities. Going to the movies or the mall once in a while is not making a community connection because it doesn’t provide the opportunity to truly meet and interact with others. On the other hand, becoming a regular at the local coffee shop or gym, interacting with and getting to know the people who work there along with the other customers, is making a true community connection.

Ways to Learn About & Get Involved in the Community:

- ✓ Gather information from the Chamber of Commerce
- ✓ Get information from volunteer websites and information & referral sources
- ✓ Read the newspaper regarding community activities and groups
- ✓ Find out about local charitable organizations that might be in need of volunteers, such as the Red Cross, Cancer Society, United Way, Humane Society, etc.
- ✓ If your customer is interested in the arts, there may be a local theater group, chorus, arts center, or community band to get involved in
- ✓ If your customer enjoys health and wellness, check out programs at the YMCA, parks and recreation, and hospitals
- ✓ For customers who are driven by their faith and spirituality, look into community churches, temples, mosques, etc. who may need volunteers
- ✓ Civic events, such as parades, art fairs, flea markets, etc. may offer good volunteer opportunities
- ✓ Service clubs, such as Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, etc. are in every community
- ✓ Support groups like advocacy, epilepsy, weight-loss, etc. are avenues to meet people
- ✓ Interest groups like coupon clippers, garden clubs, crafts, conservation groups, etc. provide a common ground for people from all walks of life to get together

Initially, people in the community may feel more at ease if the support staff is present. Staff can assist with:

- Communication
- Introductions and first meetings
- Educating the community members about what to expect
- Assuring the individual is supported and getting their needs met
- “Out of the ordinary” behaviors or situations that may occur
- Being a role model on how to interact with the individual (treat them like you would anybody else, don’t make a fuss, give them independence but assist when needed....)

Some Tips About Helping People Develop Friendships:

- Look for opportunities for people to come together around common interests.
- Provide only as much support as necessary to make the experience successful, using the least intrusive strategies.
- Sometimes we need to teach people with disabilities the art of friendship, how it involves both give and take. Those with disabilities have at times been “excused” from these aspects of friendship and may need encouragement and support in giving, sharing, cooperating and communicating with their new friends in the community.
- Some people become very demanding and have unrealistic expectations of a person’s time and attention when they develop a friendship. Boundaries and expectations need to be clear in all relationships.
- There is always some risk in developing new relationships. Staff may have to assist people to understand when they are being treated poorly or being taken advantage of. They may need help in understanding the clues that indicate when you should stop being friends with a person.



The most effective way to increase the likelihood of successful relationship building is to be a role model. Community members will take the lead of staff and model their behavior after staff.

Additional Information about Natural Supports:

North Carolina Relationships Initiative

<http://www.hsri.org/project/north-carolina-relationships-initiative/overview/>

North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities

<http://www.nccdd.org/>

The Arc of Mecklenburg County

http://www.arcmeck.org/Resource_Guide.pdf

Job Access

<http://jobaccess.org/>

Ability Awareness

<http://www.abilityawareness.org/index.htm>

NC Assistive Technology Project

<http://www.ncatp.org/>

Ability Magazine

<http://www.abilitymagazine.com/>