

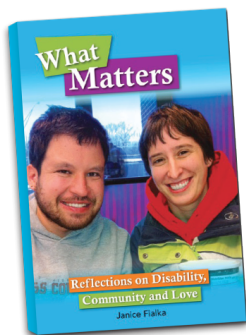
Inclusion Includes Belonging: How to Create and Sustain a Circle of Support

By Emma Fialka Feldman, Micah Fialka Feldman, and Janice Fialka



Micah Fialka-Feldman leads a meeting of his “Circle of Support” at Syracuse University. The group helps Micah make plans and decisions around his education, employment, social life, and more.

*Note: A scene from INTELLIGENT LIVES shows Micah leading a meeting of his “Circle of Support” at Syracuse. Micah’s Circle meetings started in elementary school, and in this article he and his family offer suggestions on starting and maintaining a Circle of Support (also called Circles of Friends or Connections). For more information about Circles and Micah’s story, read *What Matters: Reflections on Disability, Community and Love* (2016) by Janice Fialka and visit www.danceofpartnership.com and www.throughthesamedoor.com.*



A Few Thoughts From Micah

My Circle of Friends started when I was in third grade. I’m now 33 years old. I still have a Circle of Support. When I want to do new things, have fun, or need help or a ride, or want to try skiing, or yoga, or just want to hang out with my friends, I know my Circle is there to plan with me or support me. Sometimes I have to make important decisions, like choosing a new roommate or thinking about my future goals. I’m more confident because I know I can talk it over with my Circle. I help them too. We help each other. We do it together. We meet once a month. A couple of years ago, I wanted to start dating. I was excited and kind of scared. I talked it over with my Circle. They helped me do “practice dating.” I got less scared and started dating.

I always tell parents who have young kids with disabilities, “Start a Circle of Friends.” I tell my adult friends with disabilities, “Start a Circle of Friends.” In my Circle, we laugh a lot, eat pizza, and talk about things that I want to talk about. Sometimes they help me think about things that I haven’t thought about. My Circle is one of the best things I have in my life.

When to start a Circle: There is no set grade or age to start a Circle. Some Circles start in any grade, K-12. Some start when the person with the disability is an adult of any age. The main issue is to know that Circles can dramatically change the quality of a person’s life and strengthen relationships for ALL of the members. It’s never too late to start a Circle.

Who initiates: In K-12 grades, Circles are often initiated by family members working collaboratively with school staff, such as a social worker, speech therapist, counselor or teacher, etc. Adults with disabilities who want to build a Circle can find a skilled facilitator, social worker, or experienced friend to facilitate the gatherings. (Note: we did not use the word “meeting.” Circle “gatherings” are not typical meetings but are grounded in fun and conversation. Think of Circles as “a party with a purpose.”)

Steps to Creating and Maintaining Circles of Support

- **Seek out someone to talk to about Circles.** Some people can dive right into building a Circle, but most of us need to think it through and build our comfort and confidence to invite support. Check out resources (www.inclusion.com), and/or talk to someone who has been in a Circle. Grow your comfort with the idea of Circles. Learn how Circles work, etc. Find out why Micah and others say, “Circles are one of the best things in my life.”



THE 4 I’S TO CIRCLES

- 1. Intentional:**
Some relationships evolve more naturally. Circles are intended to connect people together in fun, meaningful, ongoing ways. Intentionality can result in genuine belonging and friendships.
- 2. Invitation:**
Involvement often takes an invite to join or become familiar with the Circle. Most people won’t come into a Circle if they are not invited.
- 3. Interests:**
Building a Circle around the interests or growing interests of the person with the disability often results in new opportunities and deeper connections. The interests can be hobbies, talents, sports, politics, current events, spiritual or religious groups, or may be something totally new and unexpected. Think of it as a “Circle of Connections.”
- 4. Individual with disability :**
Build on the hopes, dreams, desires, gifts, etc. of the person with the disability. Support their active involvement and growth. Learn with and from the person.



Micah first created his Circle of Support in elementary school, with the help of his parents Janice Fialka and Rich Feldman. The Circle met regularly throughout his entire school career, and he created a new Circle of Support when he moved to Syracuse.

- **Make a list of people to invite.** Potential Circle members do not all need to be friends of the self-advocate. Use networks that build on the self-advocate's passions and interests: people from local businesses, faith-based settings, sports, community centers, art, social media, technology, and/or special interests groups. Think outside the box. Intentionally include some same-age peers.
- **Initial Invitations.** In K-12 settings, teachers, family members, and the student (depending on their age) can talk to a few students or parents about Circles. Parents, teachers, and the student can co-write a letter explaining Circles (see Sample Letter) and invite students to join. After high school and into adulthood, share a letter or flyer of invitation to potential members. Consider an initial phone call or face-to-face conversation to create a comfortable and casual connection. The Circle can consist of a variety of people, but it is essential that many of the members are peers. Actively engage the person with the disability to identify people to invite.
- **Plan an initial meeting.** Explain the basics of the Circle in an initial meeting. Not all people will necessarily join. Some might become involved in other ways. Consider doing a MAP (Making Action Plan, [see inclusion.com]) or some fun way to share the story, hopes, dreams, and gifts of the person during the first Circle gathering. Serve food and create a welcoming atmosphere.
- **Keep the person with the disability at the center.** Encourage and support the active participation of the person with a disability in the Circle gatherings, i.e. in welcoming people, planning the agenda, co-facilitating, etc. Support their growth in facilitating while honoring what they are most comfortable doing.

- **Value participation in different ways.** Build a Circle (and grow the Circle) by recognizing the various ways people can contribute. One Circle member might get together to watch movies or go to a concert. Another member might be reliable for transportation to and from events. Another member might be great at networking and finding new members. Consider the talents of all in the Circle!
- **Take Risks.** All people grow when they take risks and step outside of their comfort zone, make mistakes, and reflect. Often people with intellectual disabilities have the fewest opportunities to take risks as our misunderstanding of safety is based on the idea of routine. Family members, in particular, must challenge their understanding of success and grow to become comfortable with the idea of some risk taking. The Circle is an excellent way to help families move out of the strong role of protector and move closer to being a guide. One Circle created a plan for how a young adult with intellectual disabilities would take a bus trip to see a friend in another city. Initially, her parents were concerned and were hesitant. The Circle and the young woman identified each step and practiced how to take public transportation. A plan was put in place with the active involvement of the Circle. Family members are more able to step back when they know that other supports are stepping forward.
- **Nudging:** People won't come to what they are not invited to. Teachers can reach out to families whose children have connections with students that have a disability. Families of children who do not have a disability may feel uncertain about how to invite a student with a disability for a play date. Teachers can provide helpful ways to enhance their comfort. Children benefit from intentionally supporting an emerging friendship. When we invite others into the Circle, more is possible! Other examples include: the local business-owner of a



Micah Fialka-Feldman with his friend Mike Boyd.

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comic store might be invited to the Circle of a child who loves comic books. The local community-center staff might be invited to the Circle to help facilitate participation of the student in sports or recreational activities. Nudging, sending more than one email, following up with phone calls, and taking individuals out to coffee helps people get involved, to follow through, and be part of the community.

- **Adult guidance:** Adults can support friendships by giving kids tools to engage in conversations and modeling how to talk with respect about issues or problems that might arise. At times, the most challenging aspect of peer relationships is simply not knowing what to say. Helping people “break the ice” about differences and learning how to respectfully talk about differences are skills needed at all ages. Adults frequently “tip-toe” around the idea of differences.



Micah with his sister Emma Fialka-Feldman when they were children. Emma, now an elementary school teacher in Boston, says in the film, “Micah and I live closer to each other than we do to our parents. And I don’t know if anyone knew that that was going to be possible in his life. It’s just these constant reminders that you don’t know what people are going to do.”

Learning to become comfortable with simply naming and honoring these awkward issues often helps them move into more comfortable ways of communicating.

- **Celebrate:** Plan gatherings where food, fun, and festivities are shared, such as an ice cream date, picnic, or field trip to a film with all or some of the Circle.
- **Take time to reflect:** On a regular basis, take time to think about how things are going, what is working, and what might be needed to sustain the Circle. ALL relationships go through various phases. Pay attention and honor the process.
- **A Note about Circle of Friends in Schools:** Teachers, staff, and families can collaborate to design both in-school and out-of-school experiences for the Circle. Students with disabilities often have many staff supporting them. Unintentionally,

Take time to think about how things are going, what is working, and what might be needed to sustain the Circle.

these well-intentioned adults can create a “wall” around the student with a disability, making it hard for peers to interact in typical ways. The Circle can help to break down the the wall and offer many opportunities to be with the students in real ways. Some of Micah’s friends helped him prepare for his IEP meetings by creating an “awesome” PowerPoint. They attended part of the meetings to support him and share ideas. They talked about what he was learning, what he wanted to learn more about, and what was helping him learn.