



Connecting people and building social relationships

by Deb Rouget

From our arrival into the world our lives are immersed in social relationships. We are naturally part of our families, the community and the fabric of many social contexts and relationships. As we develop so do our friendships, associations and support networks. For those with a disability this is not always the case.

There are a number of reasons for this. One of the major reasons is that people with a disability become part of a human service system that is not conducive to building social relationships. Relationships stem from people not systems and increasingly people with a disability are immersed in options that are removed from the natural social contexts and situations that most people take for granted. Their only associations become other people with a disability or people, who are paid to be there. As Ric Thompson (2005)¹ suggests, human service denies what was originally an individual or family domain. As individuals and families hand this domain over to human service, so it seems the dislocation and isolation from one's natural community and its citizens increases.

It is not to say that the community is a panacea or magical answer but it is accepted that for children without a disability this is where life happens. This is where they will be educated, find work, form friendships and reciprocal relationships. It is, at the end of the day what we all hope for. The removal of these natural occurrences may mean that many opportunities will be denied – one of which is the making of friends that will support, encourage, teach, provide safety from harm and with whom one can enjoy life. In many respects the community is extremely fertile ground for social connection and one which remains relatively untapped.

Over the past five years, the Personalised Lifestyle Assistance project has worked alongside individuals and families to ensure their lives do not become dislocated from their communities and the abundance of associations and friendships that could emerge if given the chance. Following are some of our learnings.

Relationships and friendship arise from sharing common interests and passions

If we think about our own lives, most of our associations

and friendships stem from our common or shared interests and passions with other people. This may be the type of work we pursue, a hobby, sport, religion, further education etc. Sometimes our interests can be quite ordinary and shared by many people. For example, football in Melbourne is an interest that is shared by many and connects people, even if they don't play the game. Other interests may be more obscure. For example, collecting clocks or reptiles! Needless to say there will be other people in the community who share a similar obscure interest and passion that, to some, may be seen as an obsession!

The sharing of common interest is also a good strategy for people who may have difficulty in communicating. Often sharing an interest doesn't rely on verbal communication but an expression of joy and understanding. The "sharing" is the connector.

Thus it is vital that we know what makes or could make people "tick" i.e. their passions and interests. It is then important to harness these interests as not only a source of enjoyment but as a potential and powerful social connector.

One has to be 'in' and 'part' of community to have the opportunity to meet people

It is impossible to be genuinely 'in' and 'part' of community if all of your time is spent in a 'special' program that segregates you from the community. At best, people may meet a few people who share a disability, paid workers and have fleeting moments of community access. It's almost impossible for one's unique interests to emerge and flourish and to have the opportunity to develop a range of associations and friendships. Once a person's interests are identified, the next step is to investigate potential places in the community where other people share the common interest. There are many resources that assist us with the search eg the web, telephone books, community resource

guides, telephone books, community notice boards, brochures at festivals etc. However, David Schwartz (1992)² quotes a study in Chicago that aimed to identify 'invisible' associational groupings in a 24-block area. The study found that 575 hidden associational groupings existed. Thus, the need to immerse oneself in the local community and talk with people is also a vital strategy.

People need to join the community 'one person at a time'

Often the human service response to community inclusion has been to assist a group of people to access the community. e.g. shopping, swimming programs. Even neighbourhood houses operate 'special groups' for people with a disability. In this instance, people are physically present but often remain isolated in 'their group' and interaction on an individual basis with other community members is limited. The notion of assisting 'one person at a time' to pursue a unique interest or and passion makes it more conducive to building genuine reciprocal relationships with other citizens.

Repetition as a strategy to build social relationships

Most people develop relationships through repetition. That is being and doing at the same place and time every week. It's this consistency that assists people to get to know each other over time.

Begin with building moments

From the outset it may seem daunting to build a good community life with a range of valued roles and relationships but if one thinks about creating 'moments', as Michael Kendrick suggests, the task is less overwhelming. So starting with one small opportunity or moment can be the seed of many other opportunities that follow and flourish.

The art of asking

Ric Thompson (2005), in his article on *The Art of Asking*, states that when we come to 'asking' we often enter a period of silence and apprehension. Thompson suggests that this may stem from handing one's life over to the human service domain and somehow losing the ability

or failing to ask. It may also stem from our fear of rejection. We need to be prepared to ask as it's vital to building good community lives and social relationships. Thompson also puts forward John McNight's suggestions about needing to understand the reasons why we are asking, who to ask, how, when and where to ask. We have found, as Thompson suggests, many people in the community have never been asked. When they are asked, encouraged and supported the community has responded very positively. Especially when it's a question of promoting or sharing a common interest rather than meeting all of a person's needs! The larger or more unclear "the ask" sometimes the more daunting for people. So carefulness about what one is asking for is crucial. Thus, you may not ask for someone to become one's friend but the friendship may emerge from sharing a common interest.

Not every time we ask we achieve what we want! People may simply not be able to help at the time. If this is the case we should use the opportunity to ask if they know someone who could assist. As Thompson suggests, it is important to learn from our mistakes, refine our skills and keep on asking! It's also important to develop our skill for asking and do it in a way that is comfortable and not confronting. Some people and families ask directly. Others have found that sharing their story or interest leads people to offer. Others ask someone else to do the "asking"!

Intentionality is needed to build relationships

Once a person is pursuing their interest in the community, if we do not focus our efforts on intentional relationship building, then its development is left to chance. Many individuals with an intellectual disability will need assistance to pick up on social cues and advance a friendship in a way that occurs naturally for many people. Keeping our eyes peeled for people who constantly show interest in the person, finding out a bit more about them and building invitation outside the interest will assist in the further development of friendship. For example, asking a person at work who is equally fanatical about the football to go to a game or asking someone for dinner or to the movies is a good way to develop a friendship further. We need to assist people to nurture the relationship so it can flourish.

Valued roles as a means to enhancing people's connection

It is when people are a part of community and take up roles that are valued within our society that they become accepted for who they are and what they contribute (Wolfensberger, 1988)³. It is through becoming an employee or club member that people become more than their disability and many of the negative assumptions about people fade away. It is possible to expand and deepen people's valued roles. For example, a person may be a club member but exploration of further valued roles may lead them to becoming "the welcomer" in the club, "the social organiser", "the equipment organiser" etc. This is also a good way to enhance people's contribution so that they become an integral part of an association and would be missed if not present!

Reorientating supports to social inclusion

Many of the individuals and families we have assisted have reorientated their thinking and resources to focus on unique arrangements around their son/daughter so that they can work towards a good community life that involves genuine inclusion, valued roles and the development of a range of social relationships and friendships. They hired and directed the right supports to work towards a good life.

Some examples of people becoming part of their communities and developing a range of social relationships

There are many good examples of people concentrating their efforts on genuine inclusion and building social relationship that give us heart and encouragement. The following are some examples of this:

- By pursuing her love for television Lauren became an usher. She developed a relationship with a co-worker who shares her passion for football. They have been to the Footy Show together and also a couple of games.
- Cameron now works as a receptionist. His love for sport led to a friendship with his employer who took him to Tasmania for the weekend to watch an international cricket game.
- A conversation over the fence with a neighbour led Colleen to a small job.
- Warren has a passion for the police. For some this may be seen as an obsession but his family thought more about it as a passion and how he could be supported to pursue it. A conversation with the local police station led to some volunteer work. A relationship with one of the police officers and a letter led to a volunteer position at the Police Museum.
- Dee sings in a local community choir. Given her anxiety about meeting new people, following her passion increased her comfort.
- A conversation with the local fruit shop and car retailer led to two small work experience opportunities for Ben who had sternly expressed his dislike for the special program he was involved with.

It is impossible for people to develop a range of social relationships without being present in the community and being recognised for their unique personality and contribution. Social relationships emerge from sharing common interest and on focusing on how we all build associations and friendships. If we use our own lives as a guide-post, then people with disabilities will have similar opportunities to be valued, contributing members of the community and develop genuine friendships. As soon as we isolate and congregate people their opportunities will remain limited rather than limitless!

Deb Rouget is the Facilitator of the Personalised Lifestyle Assistance project and can be contacted at debrouget@netspace.net.au or on 0412 001 388.

¹Thompson, Ric (June 2005). *The Art of Asking. Community Resource Unit Occasional Paper No. 3.*

²Wolfensberger, W. (1998). *A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization: A higher order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human services* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency (Syracuse University).

³Schwartz, David (1992). *Crossing the River – Creating a conceptual revolution in community and disability.* Cambridge, Mass: Brookline Books.