



HOW TO WIDEN YOUR FAMILY CIRCLE

SPECIAL NEEDS EDITION

Sometimes it takes another voice to say the same things you are saying to your kid(s) about the most important things in life—just in a different way. That’s what we call “widening the circle.”

Pursuing strategic relationships for your kids takes a little bit of intentionality, especially for families of children with special needs. And just like every parent, you want to find other adults who love and believe in your child just as much as you do.

The process of inviting other people into your child’s life can be as basic as 1-2-3: acknowledging who’s already there, inviting other people in, and encouraging them along the way. Let’s get started!

ACKNOWLEDGE WHO’S ALREADY THERE

Think through family members, babysitters, teachers, coaches, instructors, therapists, nurses, Small Group Leaders. Who are the people who already have influence in your child’s life?

Ask yourself this question: If my child won’t/can’t talk with me about something (it happens), which adult in their lives would they go to that represents our same family values? Write their names here. (If you don’t have a name for every blank, it’s okay.)

INVITE OTHERS INTO YOUR CIRCLE

Your support system might already include a lot of people outside of your nuclear family based on the reality of your child’s diagnosis. Think about being more intentional with some of those people who are already a part of your family’s life. Start with a list of people you admire or want to get to know better. Instead of just seeing them in the role they play (nurse, therapist, babysitter), consider inviting them to be an even more integrated part of your family’s circle. Then be bold and make the first move. Here are a couple of ways to get started:

- Have a family game or dessert night and invite a few people you want to get to know. This is a great way to shift from a working relationship to a personal relationship with some of the professionals your family interacts with on a regular basis.
- Volunteer in your child’s school and build rapport with their teachers and aides.
- Invite a college student, your child’s Small Group Leader, or volunteer who works with your child at church to dinner.
- Does your child have a favorite thing they love to do (like feeding the fish at the pond in the park or taking the dog for a walk)? Invite one of your child’s favorite adults to do it with you and your child.
- Does that adult need any insight or information to help them navigate the challenges your child faces?

SOME TIPS

Tip #1 It's natural for others to feel tentative about stepping into a relationship when there are so many unknowns, especially for those who are not a part of the special needs world. You know your child better than anyone else so developing an "All About Me" quick sheet might help ease some of the anxiety for someone who really wants to connect.

Here are some things to include in the "All About Me" sheet:

- Summary of Diagnosis (keep this brief and use layman terms)
- Likes/Dislikes
- Strengths
- What causes/eases anxiety

You can make this as detailed as you want but sometimes less is more. You want to give someone a quick snapshot of your child but allow them to discover some of your child's character traits as their relationship deepens.

Tip #2 Make it a point to connect with those in the circle to keep the dialogue open. You want them to feel comfortable raising concerns or asking you questions. This is likely a new area for them to step into and they need to know you are a safe place for them to find information.

Tip #3 Widening your circle and inviting others in, doesn't mean you are pushed out. Your child's circle is always going to include you. Finding those people that you connect with and your child responds to in a way he/she doesn't respond to you is priceless. Those are the people you want spending time with your family and speaking into your child's life. It might feel uncomfortable at first but the goal is for everyone in your life to feel like family. Letting them in—to see the good, the bad, and the ugly—is a part of the process.

Who are you going to invite? Write their names here.

ENCOURAGE THOSE IN YOUR CIRCLE

Now it's time to appreciate and invest in the people in your circle.

- Honor the people in your kid's life by inviting them to experience special moments with you: your child's game, concert or birthday party. You may even want to consider inviting them over to celebrate a "win" for your child. (See the Celebrating Your Child's Wins: Special Needs Edition resource.)
- Ask someone with a skill your child is interested in to teach them something about it.
- FaceTime out-of-town grandparents once a week.
- Saying 'I'm truly thankful for you' goes a long way. So does a Starbucks gift card or making their favorite baked treat!
- Encourage them with words like: "How can I pray for you?" "How can I make this relationship easier for you?" "Is there anything I can do to support you better?"
- Invite them into your home for coffee or dinner and build a family relationship. What's one thing you can do to support or encourage each person in your child's circle?