



## **Growing up with Disability**

*PLUS - A Circle of Support*

### **Woman**

You tell me how it works.

### **Boy/Girl**

We do it on Fridays.

### **Carol Cooper**

Circles of support project with Plus was set up about 18 months ago in Stirling. It's to help children with disabilities to become more socially included.

It's a very powerful tool to give children, to allow them to support each other and generally they're really keen to do it.

### **Joanna**

How did you find out about it?

### **Katrina**

Erm well, there's one Carol came in to our classroom and told us about it and we're were to mark our names down if we wanted to be in.

### **Carol**

To set up a circle, normally I get a referral, often it's from the school themselves. I then contact the parent and the child to ensure that they are happy for it to go ahead. Obviously if the child doesn't want to be involved in it then it just doesn't proceed.

There are 6 people in Phoenix's circle including Phoenix and we've been meeting for 6 sessions in the primary school and that's going to then continue in the high school with some of the children are going to the same school.

### **Aileen**

My daughter Phoenix is really active with her friends. She loves dancing, she's quite a creative person in that way and she really likes interacting with younger kids, so she's got lots of friends that are younger than her. But equally, she gets on really well with her, her peers at school and she's just a normal 12-year-old child.

### **Carol**

With circles of support encourage peer group support, so it's children of the same age who are more likely to become proper friends of the child. They'll have more in common and they'll have more opportunities then to socialise in a more natural and realistic way.

Generally I do a full class meeting to get volunteers for the circle, normally between 6 and 8 people from within the focus child's class. Then we get permission from their parents for them to be involved.

(music with background voices)

### **Carol**

And we meet once a week for between 20 and 30 minutes and we do activities, play games, things to try and encourage the children to get to know each other better.

### **Joanna**

Can you tell me because you've had about 6 circle sessions haven't you?

**Phoenix**

We do it on Fridays

**Joanna**

Fridays ... so what happens, so tell me how it works in school?

**Katrina**

Well we like play games that will like get us more active and communicate with each other and then we say nice things about each other, like what we think of the like the person to the left or right, so.

**Woman**

So what would you say was a good thing about Phoenix today?

**Katrina**

That she's like, that she's good with communicating with people and she just doesn't sit and do nothing like other people do.

**Carol**

All the children benefit from it. The focus child themselves gets the opportunity to socialise where perhaps their disability would have prevented them from having that opportunity. The other children get to know the focus child better and perhaps get to know the issues that they face.

**Joanna**

Who are you going to school with?

**Katrina**

We're both going to school ...

**Phoenix**

...it's ???

**Joanna**

What's it called?

**Phoenix**

Walls High??

**Joanna**

And what's it like at Walls High?

**Lauren**

Big. Quite scary because ... you go from like the oldest in the primary school to the youngest of the high school.

**Joanna**

How do you feel about that Phoenix?

**Phoenix**

Scared and nervous.

**Aileen**

With Phoenix going to a new school I think there'll be a lot of challenges for her because of her special needs for one thing. And also because she doesn't have a lot of confidence in new situations. She often gets very shy and draws into herself and I often worry about what high school's going to be like because even for a normal, outgoing 13 year old person, high school can be very daunting.

**Carol**

And this is the second time I've used a circle of support as a transition tool from primary school to high school. Obviously all children are nervous about the transition to high school and children with disabilities often have a higher level of anxiety because of their additional support needs. So having almost like a comfort zone, a sort of group of friends that they know they can depend on at primary school, and then they know that when they get to high school these children are going to be there as a sort of safety net. Although in Phoenix's case there's going to be a lot of formal support in place for her, you know, there will be times when she'll probably just need to have friends about her rather than support for learning assistance, people like that. So it should give her a sort of peace of mind that she'll not need to panic the same when she gets there.

I think circles of support are a very good idea. The fact that more and more children are being integrated, quite rightly, into mainstream schools, it gives everybody the benefits of getting to know everybody better in a safe, comfortable environment.

**Aileen**

The feedback was very, very supportive and very positive and Phoenix's attitude towards high school changed so that she was quite comfortable to go. She knew what was expected, she knows now that her friends will be going to the same school and I think she's a lot more confident about going than she would have been normally, had she not had the Circles of Support.