

Creating a Circle of Support

Coping With Stress

All parents face stressful situations that call upon our best coping skills. How successfully we are able to cope with our crisis may very well be related to the support network that surrounds us. Some of us are not only confronted with typical family stress, but also face the additional joys and challenges of parenting our child with special needs or illness. For us, a strong “circle of support” is critical to our ability to cope with the stress that is unique to our lives—support that may come in the form of sympathetic listeners, companionship, information, practical assistance and more.

Think about the way you handle stress. Ask yourself:

- ◆ In what areas do I need support?
- ◆ Who do I turn to for support? What kinds of support do they offer me?
- ◆ What other forms of support would I like to have? Who could I turn to for these?
- ◆ Do I feel it's OK to need support and actively seek it, or does it make me feel needy and incompetent?
- ◆ Do I believe others are willing to support me?

Many parents who have children with special needs report they don't have just a single source of support. Their network of support is made up of many individuals and resources, each offering something different. A good support system can include health care providers, social service professionals and the staff at a child's school or day care program, in addition to family and friends.

To have the opportunity to give and to receive empathetic peer support is a priceless gift. Many parents find this resource at their parent support group. Often finding other parents to connect with in supportive ways can be facilitated through your child's school or health care staff. No one understands the stress of a parent who has a child with special needs as well as someone who has a similar experience in their family.



It can take time and persistence to find truly supportive people. Sometimes they appear where you least expect them. One mother said she learned that, “You get support where you get support. If someone is helpful and can listen, I'll go back to that person again and again when I need encouragement.”

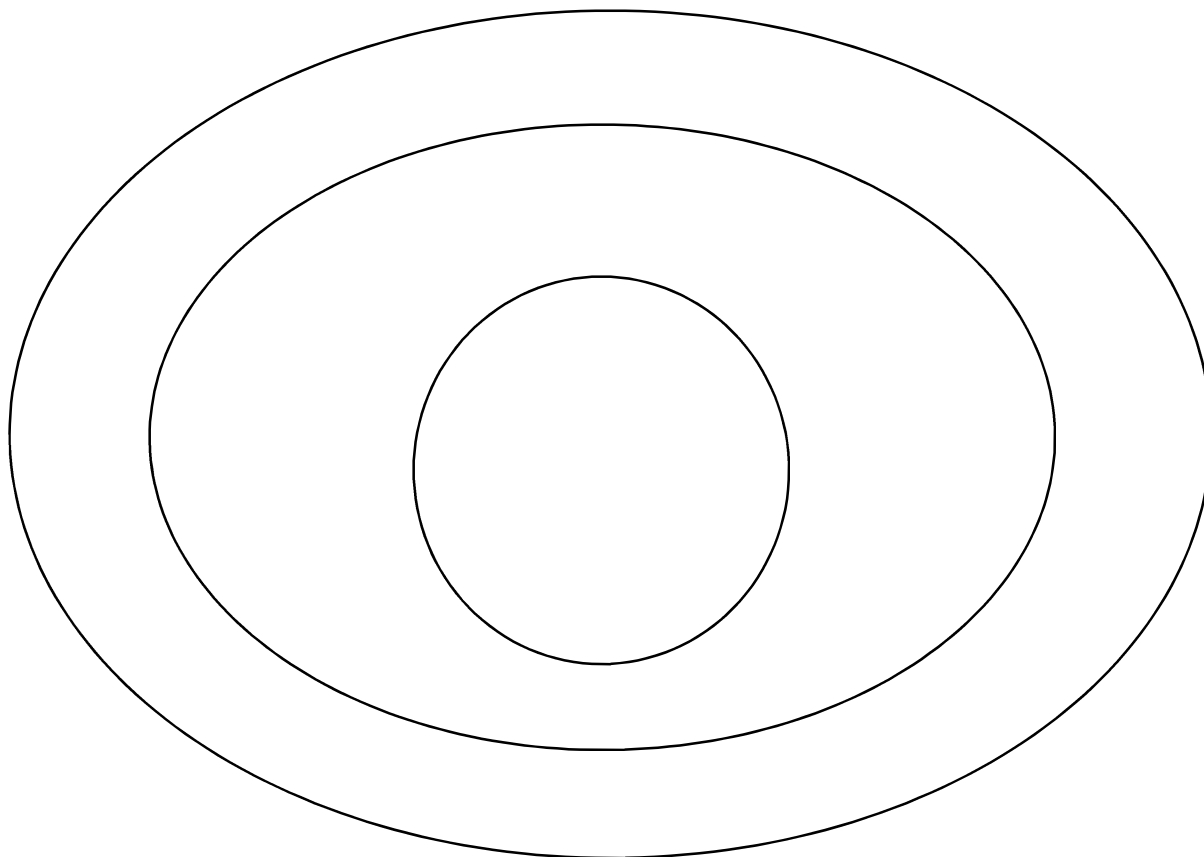
Circle of Support Activity

Surrounding ourselves with a helpful support network is critical to a parent's ability to cope with stress.

- ◆ Take ten minutes to list all the people and resources you can think of that make up your circle of support. (For example, the individuals, services and things that “keep you going.”)
- ◆ On the back of this page, write in the inner circle the names of your most valued and consistent sources of support.
- ◆ In the middle circle, write the sources of support that are important to you but are not among those you consider most critical or reliable. All the names from your list should bow be in either the inner or middle circle.
- ◆ Use the outer circle to list people or resources that are not currently sources of support but who you could consider turning to.

A Circle of Support

Coping With Stress (continued)



Circle of Support Ideas


- ◆ Partner, family siblings
- ◆ Close friends, neighbors
- ◆ Parent support group
- ◆ Other parents who have children with special needs
- ◆ Child's teacher, social worker
- ◆ Health care professionals
- ◆ Religious/spiritual support
- ◆ Jogging partner
- ◆ Babysitter
- ◆ Counselor, therapist
- ◆ Auto mechanic, affordable house cleaning service, pizza delivery

Things to Think About

- ◆ Are you surprised by where you placed certain people in your diagram?
- ◆ How would you rate your support network after seeing it laid out in this way?
- ◆ What are some specific ways to reach out for more support?

After you have finished your circle of support, consider giving something back by taking a moment to write a note telling a special person or service how much you value their support of you and your child.

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 Virginia Coalition for Child Abuse Prevention