

How to Develop Natural Supports

Natural Supports: They're All Around You!

Natural supports are defined in the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act, Section 4512 of the Welfare and Institution Code, Part (e):

Natural supports means personal associations and relationships typically developed in the community that enhance the quality and security of life for people, including, but not limited to, family relationships; friendships reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood and the community; association with fellow students or employees in regular classrooms and workplaces; and associations developed through participation in clubs, organizations, and other civic activities.

What does *natural supports* really mean? To answer this question, it may be easier to look at yourself and think about all the people in your life—friends, family, coworkers. Relationships with these people are your natural supports! Who has been instrumental in pivotal points in your life, or whom can you count on for help? What did you do to establish those relationships? These are questions some people give little thought, because natural supports are taken for granted.

It is easy to assume that most people want to live happy and comfortable lives. To achieve the lifestyle they prefer, people rely on some kind of support system or network. This is where natural supports enter. Natural supports by definition are just that—natural. They are a phenomenon of personal and community support that touch many facets of life.

Individually, or in a group, people use natural supports to sustain relationships based on mutual interests. Persons constituting your natural support network do not teach skills or facilitate a learning environment; they just nurture and support. In doing so, your skills and competencies may be enhanced.



Natural supports evolve and change over years. Through a variety of experiences, people develop supportive relationships. These relationships have little structure or any founding identity, other than they are reciprocal. There is no one way to develop these supports. No two natural supports will ever be alike; each will be unique in what it has to offer and unique in how it is developed. Natural supports represent "not to do *for*, but *with*, people."

Who?

Natural supports comprise an important part of each person's life. Supports are vital in helping to promote the development of a healthy and happy life. A person serving as a natural support should recognize that each person makes his or her own contributions to the relationship. Building natural supports does not have to be limited; anyone interested in the life of someone they know can contribute to building their natural support network.

Why?

Natural supports benefit those involved. First and foremost, having a support system promotes independence and growth. Natural supports allow a person to gain confidence by contributing toward a meaningful association or relationship. Developing natural supports enables people to be who they are, allowing their lives to grow and (perhaps) causing existing problems to lessen. Most importantly, natural supports allow for an environment that fosters laughter, attention, respect, and love.

How?

There is no single method or easy answer for developing a system of natural supports. It may require considerable time to develop and nurture natural supports, but if people do nothing, they'll have nothing. The possibilities are endless, given some creativity and willingness.

Several factors must be considered when generating a natural support network:

- **Know the individual.** In order to find viable channels of networks and resources, know a person's interests, likes, and dislikes. You can begin by learning about this from a variety of people, including family, extended family, friends, and coworkers.

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- **Communicate.** Communication is a vital feature of identifying a person's needs, wants, and desires.
- **Be persistent.** Development of natural supports can be slow and tedious, thus requiring persistence. Continue to attend groups, meetings, social events, and so forth. Keep going back, establishing rapport and allowing allies to form.

Developing natural supports is a two-way street. The process of how people connect with others should be recognized. When working to build natural supports, exercise sensitivity and respect toward cultural backgrounds. Acknowledging the culture, traditions, and customs of each person may expand resources available through special events and social or support groups. This will enhance self-esteem by allowing people to participate and take pride in who they are.

Bear in mind that it's difficult to develop natural supports in an unnatural environment. For example, a friendship is something that evolves naturally through time and experience. Interaction cannot be controlled or directed, just given time and opportunity to develop and mature. Natural supports help to broaden a person's world, and with a larger world comes more options and, in turn, more choices.

The development of supports also requires perseverance and energy, because natural supports must evolve. There will be several times or occasions where setbacks and possibly rejection will arise. This is to be expected and prepared for with a variety of planned options. Keep in mind, rejection does not necessarily mean failure. Just be sure to use it as a learning experience.

When a situation is not working, find out why. Talk with the other person. Determine if it's a problem that can be solved in the current environment. If it cannot be resolved, begin finding other supports. Remember, there are no "sure bets" when developing natural supports. Just as in any friendship or relationship, certain "chemistry" has to attract people. Find that chemistry and tap into it.

Sometimes there are barriers toward developing natural supports. It is important to know when to back away.

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