

PATH: Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope

As part of its ASPIRE project, GSA has encouraged persons and families to use PATH as a creative planning tools for the future. Here are some ideas about PATH and CIRCLES as planning tools for better lives and more secure futures, based on a PATH workshop and several PATH events for young adults with ASD. GSA has made it possible for these PATH experiences to be led and recorded by a pair of professionally skilled facilitators.

What is PATH?

PATH is a powerful, creative and useful planning tool
PATH is daring, bold and action-oriented
PATH is personal
PATH is life-giving and life-changing
PATH is feeling the fear and doing it anyway
PATH is flying into the unknown and having a circle there to support the dream
PATH is a social process, a journey of self-discovery
PATH is an opportunity to give and receive a gift

What PATH is not....

PATH is not a prepackaged set of steps
PATH is not a guarantee
PATH is not a test

Who are PATHFINDERS?

People who want to create their own future
Individuals with a dream or desire to move forward
Families who want to work together
Friends who want to make a difference in someone else's life

What are the Steps of PATH?

Create a clear picture or vision of where you want to be
Identify your goals—focus for the next year
Ground yourself in the now
Identify people to enroll on the journey
Recognize ways to build strength
Chart Action Steps needed to achieve your goal

What is a Circle of Support?

A group of people who agree to meet on a regular basis to help a person with a disability to accomplish certain personal visions or goals, by overcoming obstacles and opening doors to new opportunities.

PATH was developed by Jack Pearpoint, John O'Brien and Marsha Forest beginning in 1991. Facilitators are trained by Pearpoint and associates at the Marsha Forest Centre for Inclusion-Family-Community in Toronto.

One Family's Experience of PATH

With the encouragement and support of ASPIRE, we recently had a PATH meeting for our son, Anthony, and would like to share a few thoughts to help any other families who may be wondering whether to embark on this process for their own son or daughter. We were initially a little reluctant to host such an event for our son as we felt awkward about inviting others outside our immediate family to participate. In reality, we discovered that people were honored to be invited, willingly gave of their time and offered much in the way of support, concern and ideas.

Our PATH event was on a Saturday from 10 until 3pm with lunch provided. Our two wonderful facilitators led the informal discussion with nine of us present and, to our amazement, Anthony actually stayed in our circle for much of the session even though he is nonverbal and could only participate very indirectly.

Although initially our thoughts were directed at an ideal future for Anthony--which is not immediately attainable--we did come up with some practical ideas which within 2-3 months enhanced his life.

At the preliminary meeting with the PATH facilitators we were encouraged to contact Foundations as they are funded by the Ontario MCSS to help individuals transitioning from school to work. Foundations staff were indeed been able to help us with support hours and ideas for structuring Anthony's time, now that he has left school and has no access to a day program.

Other ideas that came up at the PATH resulted in placing an ad at the local university to find a volunteer who could take Anthony swimming. We were successful in finding a student willing to do this. We have a "Best Buddy" who will also be taking him to some other community activities and we have a new male support worker who is spending about 10 hours a week with Anthony. There were many other thoughts and ideas that are yet to be utilized. We have reduced some of his perseverative behaviour and are getting him to do more household tasks which, of course, requires more effort from us but it is really worthwhile.

In conclusion: families may tend to put limitations on the possibilities for the future for their son/daughter. There are also services and options out there that they may not be aware of. We certainly thought we were well educated in this area but still discovered some useful opportunities for Anthony. We feel that a family has everything to gain and nothing to lose by doing a PATH. In the end, we felt we owed it to Anthony to make this effort for him.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT PATH

1. We worry that we don't know anyone interested in helping in this way and that none of the friends and family members we invite will want to come.

- More than 20 came to our son's PATH! It's as if people who know us hesitated because they didn't what would be useful or appreciated. They seemed really glad to be asked.
- Knowing that various others—family, school, church, neighbours—have been invited and are coming seems to make everyone feel comfortable and know that they can share roles and responsibilities of being our daughter's friend.

2. We hesitate to ask people to give up a large chunk of their time for a PATH meeting.

- Five hours (including a meal break) is quite a long time, but it's really necessary to focus in enough depth.
- The atmosphere was informal and relaxed and it seemed that our guests were enjoying it and feeling good about their own contributions.
- They felt really good that they had been able to help our family. They all commented that they found the experience very rewarding.

3. How can we find a time that will suit everyone interested in coming?

- I suggest that families make a list of the key people they would like to attend and get an idea of their availability before they settle on a date.

4. We often feel so different from other families because our son has autism, we hardly dare to hope that others could understand what life is like for our son/daughter and our family's situation and fears.

- Taking part in a PATH helps everyone to think more creatively and positively. The facilitators led us to focus on visions and goals and the steps we might take to realize our dreams.
- Some other meetings and case conferences we have attended because our daughter has autism seem to go on about what's wrong with her. The PATH was special because the facilitators led us to listen to the person with autism and to focus on her/his strengths and goals.
- PATH helps everyone taking part to see and feel the things we have in common rather than the differences.

5. The guests sharing in our son's PATH don't know one another already. They might not be understanding and tolerant of each other's attitudes.

- All the varied responses were treated with respect and built into the total PATH picture.
- Older family members who may be pessimistic were listened to with the utmost respect and thus gained a sense of relief over their feelings of helplessness in not being able to do more for the family.
- Above all, our son really felt it to be his PATH, had a very definite voice and felt very proud to be important!

6. We already know that the local service system offers nothing for adults like our son. How could a PATH meeting help us?

- PATH's brainstorming and informal contacts opened up new possibilities we had not thought of when we were looking only to the traditional agencies.
- Because of the people we meet through PATH, we may find agencies and groups that can help. So we do not feel that we have been cast afloat to figure things out alone.
- We also found a second support worker, the son of one of the participants at the PATH, who is eminently suitable for the job having a brother with autism.
- We looked around our community and found two volunteers who now share time with our son.
- We also decided to add a little more structure to our son's life at home by having him do more for himself and more simple chores.

7. When, in a person's life, is the best time to have a PATH meeting?

- A PATH can help at any time, and ideally should be experienced at intervals in a person's life. A PATH can be especially helpful at transition times, such as between school and adult years, or facing life beyond one's parents.
- I think the timing was perfect for us. Our son no longer had school and I was feeling a bit overwhelmed and needed to develop some strategies.
- I'm glad it came when it did as I was very low on hope and might have not gone through with it if we'd left too long getting started. I wish I had the opportunity several years ago.
- Yes earlier in my son's life would have been helpful, say about age 14 or 15, instead of over 18. It would have put more order in our lives. However, I'm not sure I was ready to let others take on some of the load at that time.
- The PATH helped me feel that I could start to let go of the tremendous weight of responsibility for everything in my son's life.

8. How many participants should be invited for a PATH?

- Including the person and her/his parents, perhaps at least six, to allow for varied ideas.
- A much larger group may pose problems of timing and balance for everyone to contribute, but there is also joy that so many people with varied experiences and perspectives care about and are interested enough to share in the PATH.

9. Could a family and friends do a PATH by ourselves, without trained and skilled facilitators?

- Discussions among a vulnerable person's family and friends who really care can be useful. To get the full benefits of a PATH, families should ask the help of experienced PATH facilitators who are not personally involved in the person's life and thus have some detachment.
- Having two facilitators working as a team is best—one may have the special role of drawing out people's thoughts while the other sketches ideas and suggestions in the graphic record. The facilitators have a preliminary meeting a week or two earlier with the person and parents.
- The earlier meeting served to put our minds at ease for us, by realizing that the facilitators truly understood our son's wishes, and that he and we knew what to expect.
- It was particularly helpful for us as it was during that informal meeting that I was encouraged to approach [a transition program for young adults].
- The facilitators seemed to bring out relevant areas for discussion and made sure we had some action steps at the end.

10. How realistic are our hopes of what a PATH can do?

- We knew in advance that PATH was a time for brainstorming and sharing creative ideas rather than the nuts and bolts of funded services.
- Some very specific benefits and contacts came out of the PATH, enriching our son's life.
- Our son really loved having so many friends come to the PATH for him; and the graphic poster is a precious record of what we all talked about. His fearful bad dreams stopped.
- For us as parents, it was a small light at the end of the tunnel, a renewed sense of hope, a temporary high after a long period of feeling low.
- As parents, we both felt really good about the experience--it was very worthwhile.
- The PATH poster is a great visual and organized plan for the future
- One benefit was contact with church members who, as a result of the PATH, understand our son better as to his positive abilities, not just as having behaviours that need to be controlled.

- It was a chance for family members to get relief from any guilt and to express their feelings.
- We had a clearer understanding of where people stood in their desire and willingness to be with our son in his life journey.
- Friends said they felt really good that they had been able to help our family; they all commented that they found the experience very rewarding
- Friends seemed glad of the chance to express their thoughts, and to know better how they might help and not do or say the "wrong thing."

HOWEVER:

- It's vital to keep following up. In the six months since the PATH, as no one is taking the initiative to keep in touch and follow up the offers and bright ideas they expressed at the PATH.
- I hope for future possibilities if I could get a strong Circle of Friends going. Our son needs a circle that would take on a life of its own and provide strength for the family. A circle would help bond individuals with a sense of purpose. We need more ideas of how to get and keep a circle going.

11. How is a Circle of Support developed?

The focus person decides to ask help from people they know and trust. These people are called together to focus and collaborate to reach a common goal.

Creating a PATH or Circle involves three challenges for the parents and family of person with a disability:

1. Asking others to get involved is hard, as we think we have so few friends and fear being refused
2. Opening our lives to share responsibility for our person with a disability
3. Believing that there are community people we can trust to share in a CIRCLE or PATH

12. Do I need a Circle of Support to do a PATH?

No. Your Circle of Support will evolve and grow with you. It may start with a small intimate group of 4 or 5 people with whom you plan and set some goals. Then you will invite others to join you, to join in celebrating successes and coping with challenges. As time goes by, your PATH will change and grow and your Circle will change and grow with it.

Inclusion Press Books include:

All My Life's a Circle. Using the Tools: Circles, MAPS and PATH

PATH: Planning Possible Positive Futures

Hints for Graphic Facilitators

Person-Centered Planning with MAPS & PATH:

A Workbook for Facilitators

Inclusion Press Videos include:

All Means All: An introduction to Circles, MAPS and PATH

PATH Action Pack: A Collection of 2 videotapes + the PATH Workbook

PATH Training Video-Joe's PATH