

**Natural Supports . . .**

**They're All Around You!**

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# A QUICK LOOK

## Introduction

As 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 work places; 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, co-workers. 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.

We assume 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. Natural supports are the people associated with the setting of the consumer.

Individually, or in a group, people use natural supports to sustain relationships based on mutual interests. Persons constituting the natural support network of a consumer do not teach skills or facilitate a learning environment; they just nurture and support. In so doing, the skills and competencies of the consumer 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. People with and without developmental disabilities need natural supports; disabilities are not an insurmountable barrier to the development of natural supports. Supports are vital in helping to promote the development of a healthy and happy life. These associations assist in identifying the consumer's needs, wants, and desires. A person serving as a natural support should recognize that a consumer makes his or her own contributions to the relationships. Building natural supports does not have to be limited to service providers. Anyone interested in the life of someone they know can contribute to building natural supports.

### WHY?

Natural supports benefit those involved. First and foremost, the consumer benefits from having a support system that promotes independence and growth. Natural supports allow a person to gain confidence by contributing toward a meaningful association or relationship. Developing natural supports is based on what the consumer wants, not on what "professionals" recommend. This enables consumers to be who they are, allowing their lives to grow and (perhaps) causing existing problems to lessen. But most important, natural supports allow for an environment that fosters laughter, attention, respect and love.

Some theorize that challenging behaviors are the result of one of two circumstances, either a person wants something and can't have it, or a person is forced to take something that they don't want. Natural supports will support the choices of an individual and provide a safety net when things go bad. This will serve as a learning experience and growth for the individual. As an individual results relies more on natural supports, their need for services reduces.

### "TOBY"

Toby is a vivacious and energetic woman who enjoys movies and concerts. She currently lives in her own home with two roommates in Clear Lake. Toby decided to attend a music concert with several friends. After she purchased tickets for the concert, she was told she had balcony seats. This meant she would have to walk up a flight of stairs.

The service providers from where Toby was living prior to her current residence described Toby as someone who would never walk because of her unpredictable movements and constant seizures. At her previous residence, Toby had bitten her peers, and scratched and pulled their hair.

These behaviors caused considerable harm to her victims. Since Toby has moved into her own home, she's constantly making her own choices. She now lives where and with whom she wants. She's developed a sense of motivation and confidence. She states, "in order to do normal things you have to act normal." Her challenging behaviors are almost nonexistent. She has taken the initiative to control her seizures through closer medication monitoring.

When told she could exchange her tickets for seats in the downstairs area, she refused. Toby has been working, with the assistance of a walker, at spending less time in her chair. Her goal is to have no need for her chair. Now, more determined than ever, she intends to watch the concert from the balcony.

It was suggested to Toby that she sit in the lower section because of her disability. However, with the encouragement of natural supports and the development of self-confidence, she insisted on improving her abilities to do the things she wanted.

### HOW?

Traditionally, natural supports have not been addressed in services and supports for people with developmental disabilities. There is no single method or easy answer for developing a system of natural supports. It's a matter of supporting and assisting consumers to be in a position to develop associations and relationships. The activity of someone assisting in developing natural supports for a consumer is in devising strategies to bridge the gap between the opportunities for, and development of, natural supports. It may require considerable time to develop and nurture natural supports. But we know if we do nothing, we'll have nothing. The possibilities are endless, given some creativity and willingness.

Several factors regarding the consumer must be considered when generating natural supports.

- **Know the individual.** In order to find viable channels of networks and resources, the support builder must know the consumer and his or her interests, likes, dislikes, etc. You can begin by collecting information from a variety of people in the life of the consumer, including family, extended family, friends and co-workers. This enables a team to identify and construct support with the consumer based on his or her aspirations. The support builder should take care to know what the consumer wants, without his or her own judgment and values getting in the way.

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- **Communication.** Communication is a vital feature of “knowing the individual” as it enables a consumer to identify his or her needs, wants and desires. As a support builder, it is important to recognize the consumers’ ability to communicate. Again, by talking with a variety of people with whom the consumer interacts, the support builder will identify a variety of interests. For instance, a person may tell his or her friends something that they would never tell their parents. This does not mean that it’s good or bad. It’s just a matter of how people relate with each other. No two relationships will be the same and a collection of different information will be able to illustrate a more comprehensive picture of the consumer.
- **Persistence.** Development of natural supports can be slow and tedious, thus requiring persistence. Continue to attend groups, meetings, social events, etc. Keep going back, establishing rapport with community members and allowing allies to form. Let time show the qualities of the consumer. When the routine takes shape, begin to fade and become less involved. Then natural supports can become a larger role.

Developing natural supports is a two-way street between community members and the consumer. Co-workers, neighbors, business owners, as well as others interested in their community, should be sought out and introduced to the consumer on the basis of their abilities, capabilities, and potential contributions. The process of how people connect with others should be recognized. Think of “typical people, typical places and typical activities,” then identify opportunities relative to a consumer’s interest. However, be realistic. Identify members of the community that are willing and have a wide social base.

The following are some factors to consider when developing a system of support.

- **Focus on a specific geographic neighborhood.** Learn about the neighborhood. With the consumer, spend time getting to know the people who are part of the local community.
- **Develop allies within the group, social club and community.** These are people who are willing to “go to bat” for the consumer. They will be the ones who persuade others to open doors and recognize the contributions the consumer has to offer. They have connections with other individuals and will begin developing a positive networking system. Developing these allies requires the ability to “ask, ask, ask!” Talk to people you know who might know someone who might know someone else!

- **Find out about organizations and association that exist in the neighborhood.** Every group has people who are welcomers. Seek them out, get to know them, and ask for ideas, contact, and assistance.
- **Ask the association to welcome someone who has been excluded.** Community members tend to wait to be asked.
- **Pay attention to natural cues.** Figure out how much, and for how long, to lend supports. Every situation is unique and there are no rules. Be aware of when the process “takes”, this is your cue to gradually fade. Be available, but not too quick, to intervene when problems arise.
- **Stand alongside the person with disabilities and alongside community members as well.** Be a “regular” person rather than the professional.
- **Establish circles of support around a specific person.** Involve community members and let them know how they can help.
- **Support building is rarely ever over.** Remember that nothing about relationships is fixed and permanent. Informal relationships will change over time, and grow, fluctuate or cease.

When working to build natural supports we should exercise sensitivity and respect toward the consumer’s cultural background. Acknowledging the culture, traditions, and customs of the consumer may expand resources available by utilizing special events, social groups or support groups. This will enhance the self-esteem of a consumer by allowing him or her to participate and take pride in whom they are.

### “GERI”

Geri, a young, Native American adult, was interested in earning a living by working in an office. Right now, she lives in a small group home in the town of Chico and used to work in a sheltered workshop. Some of Geri’s behavior precluded her from working in the community. She would get very upset over minute issues, then her crying and screaming would become uncontrollable. The people who used to work with Geri tried to offer “incentives” to motivate her to keep her “tantrums” under control, but she would often claim that nobody really knew her. By circumstance and chance, Geri received a new case manager. The case manager was quite sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the consumers she served and identified the need for Geri to gain more exposure to her Native American culture.

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With the help of Geri, her case manager arranged for her to attend her first powwow (A Native American social gathering). Geri developed a passion for her culture and tradition. She also developed a sense of identity. She began talking about her heritage and customs of her people. Those who knew Geri began to see a significant decrease in her challenging behaviors. Geri is now an office assistant at a local business.

Bear in mind that it's difficult to develop natural supports in an unnatural environment. For example, "friendship" skills are difficult to teach; 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. With "real" friendship comes a natural system of support that has the ability to prevent minor problems from becoming overwhelming challenges. Natural supports help to broaden a consumer's world, and with a larger world comes more options and, in turn, more choices.

The development of supports also requires perseverance and energy. The support developer and consumer must think in terms of years, because natural supports must evolve. When working with the community, 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 consumer. With the consumer's permission, talk with the people around the consumer. Determine if it's a problem that can be solved in the current environment. If it cannot be resolved, go back to your allies and 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. The responsibility of the support developer is to find that "chemistry" and then tap into it.

When developing natural supports, the family should be considered. The system had not, historically, promoted the inclusion of family and friends as an integral part of consumers' natural support system. Well-intentioned professionals, who thought they knew best, separated families from their sibling, son or daughter, causing families to drift apart. However,

"...knowing someone's family history may yield new understanding of whom they are (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1992:62) Family is too important for support builders to assume that people must remain cut off from their families if there is a desire to reconnect with them."  
(O'Brien & O'Brien, 1992:66)

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A support builder must make reasonable efforts to contact family members who have not been involved, inviting them to join their relative's life again. This, however, should be based on whether the consumer wants the family to become involved again.

Sometimes the barriers of developing natural supports come from those involved with the consumer. Inadvertent and unintentional stigmatizing may occur simply because the focus has been on the consumer's deficits rather than abilities, and a "professional" is perceived as serving a "consumer." The community is perceptive, but as accommodating as it may want to be, it may end up imitating the role of the professional rather than that of a friend or support.

It is important to know when to back away, give control to the consumer and let the consumer offer his or her skills to the community, reaping the benefits and consequences of their actions. Natural supports help to create opportunities for learning and integration when they allow the consumer to assume greater responsibility and become more independent. However, the community may not always be accepting of the diversity that integration and inclusion create. It often requires education and nurturing to shape attitudes that will be accommodating to people with differences. As a provider explained in the following scenario, it becomes evident that the education must begin early.

I observed a three year old out on a dance floor where a variety of people were dancing. Several people were dancing while sitting in their wheelchairs. This three-year-old went to the dance floor, stood motionless as she stared at one of the individuals in a chair. After about 15 seconds, she realized that the person in the chair was out on the dance floor for the same reason as herself. After realizing this, the three-year-old began dancing and didn't give it any more attention.

Acceptance and change need to begin with attitude. Not only does the support builder need to work with a consumer, but also play the role of a public relations specialist. The support builder and the consumer take the multidimensional roles of educator, supporter, facilitator, public relations specialist, and most important, friends.



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