

Information Sheet

Mission

Extend-A-Family is a Toronto-wide community organization that seeks diverse opportunities wherein a variety of mutually valued relationships may flourish between individuals with a disability and others in their communities.

What is Extend-A-Family?

Extend-A-Family works in the community to facilitate the building of relationships between individuals who have disabilities and other members of the community. We believe that all people belong and that our community is stronger when all members are included. We foster public awareness of the gifts and contributions of people with disabilities.

Extend-A-Family is a not-for-profit, charitable organization governed by a volunteer Board of Directors comprised of parents of children with disabilities, self advocates and community members. Extend-A-Family is financially supported by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, The City of Toronto Community Service Partnerships Program, the Nevada lottery and other donors.

Extend-A-Family's Story

In the 1970's, a group of parents, all of whom had a child with a disability, got to know each other and quickly became mutually supportive in terms of friendship and neighbourliness. Over time, they began to express the common need for their children to experience friendships and relationships with other children and their families. They felt this would lead to a wider and safer social network in the future, as well as providing some of the natural respite that supportive friends often provide for each other's children. They also recognized the qualities and gifts that their children would bring to the relationships. They identified the need for an "asker," someone who could ask other families in the community to get to know and invite a child with a disability into their home. In 1975, twelve families decided to develop a program that would employ an "asker," and Extend-A-Family was born.

The Core Work of Extend-A-Family

The core work of Extend-A-Family is about relationship. Our relationships keep us safe and bring meaning and a sense of belonging into our lives. Through relationship we often give most deeply of ourselves; however, most people with disabilities have fewer personal relationships in their lives. It is not uncommon for people in our society to see the disability instead of the person and this prevents relationships from happening in natural ways. This is a loss to both the person with a disability and a community who has not come to know the individual's gifts and contributions.

Extend-A-Family coordinators step in to introduce people to each other who might not otherwise meet. They base their introduction on shared interests and common goals. They understand and believe deeply that each person will benefit from the relationship.

Connecting with people

The Coordinator's role is to recruit, connect and support the relationship between two parties. This may be a relationship between two individuals, one of whom has a disability. It may be a relationship between two families, one of whom has a member with a disability. The frequency with which people get together depends upon the people involved.

Connecting with a group or club

The Coordinator may also connect and support a relationship between an individual and a group or club in community, such as Brownies, Scouts, sports teams, or youth groups. These groups, whose members all share common goals, activities and interests, are natural places for friendships to grow. The Coordinator supports both the connection to the whole group, as well as recognizing and encouraging individual relationships within the group.

Connecting in school settings

The Coordinator may help develop relationships within the school setting. School is a natural place for friendships to grow. Friendship circles are groups of children who are intentionally brought together in order to get to know each other and to build welcoming and inclusive school communities for all class mates. The Coordinator facilitates circle meetings and encourages the group to plan time and activities together, and to explore the concept of friendship both in and outside of school.

Connecting with community life

The Coordinator may help cultivate a relationship among a supportive group of family, friends and neighbours who wish to ensure that an individual with a developmental disability is actively engaged in community life. Support circles create opportunities for family and friends to come together to sustain and nurture, in as natural a way as possible, an individual with a disability as an active, contributing participant in the life of family, friends, neighbourhood, school, work, faith community and leisure environments. It is neither a service nor a program but simply a process for supporting, learning and action over the long-term.

How to Get Involved

Families

We encourage families who have a child with a disability to contact Extend-A-Family directly for more information and an application package. Applications will be accepted before the individual's nineteenth birthday. A police check reference form will be included for anyone in the household over the age of eighteen. A coordinator will visit the family to become acquainted with your son or daughter and to explore the possibilities for developing relationships. Extend-A-Family is most effective when the family is as an active partner in developing relationships. Because the family is constant in the child's life, it is vitally important that they understand, support and nurture the new relationships.

Host/Host Family

Hosts are often met as the Coordinator begins to look around the natural community of

the individual with a disability and their family. Individuals and families who are interested in getting to know child with a disability and their family will then be given an information/application package. A police reference check form will be included for anyone in the household over the age of eighteen. Potential hosts will also be asked to provide three references, including the names and contact information. As part of the application process, they will meet with a Coordinator in order to learn more about the role of being a host/host family. Once the connection has been established, the relationship will continue to be supported by the Extend-A-Family Coordinator, but it is essentially an independent relationship.

Other Connecting Opportunities

Safe and Secure Futures Networks

Funded by the City of Toronto Community Services Grant.

Parents and other family members gather together to explore the question of “what will happen when I can no longer be the caregiver to my son or daughter who has a disability?” This question requires families to confront their own mortality and begin the process of planning for the future with their potentially vulnerable family member.

At monthly network meetings, the Safe and Secure Futures facilitator guides discussion, and arranges presentations based on inspiring models and studies from across North America. The mutually supportive groups consider different strategies for relationship building, financial security, network or support circle building, long term safety, and meaningful involvement in community life. The network functions as a forum for accessing the group’s knowledge, and for encouraging families to plan. Limited facilitator support is available to help families develop a support circle.

Safe and Secure Futures Networks offers ongoing learning opportunities to families, community members and professionals.

Parents / Caregiver Support Groups

This is a gathering of parents and / or caregivers who have or care for children with a disability. They come together to share their experiences, dreams, concerns and resources.

Other Information

Extend-A-Family provides workshops and events that focus on the gifts that people with disabilities bring when they are welcomed and included in their communities.

With the help of funding from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Extend-A-Family hires summer students to support children in summer camps and / or in the community for families working year round in partnership with Extend-A-Family building meaningful relationships. This funding is determined on an annual basis.

Extend-A-Family

200-3300 Yonge St, Toronto, ON, M4N 2L6

Phone: 416-484-1317 Fax: 416-4841589

Website: www.extendafamily.ca Email: info@extendafamily.ca