

Principles for partnering between Natural and Formal Supporters

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A thoughtful combination of natural and formal supports can potentially enrich a person's wellbeing. 'Formal' supports are various forms of assistance provided to a person via paid formal services, professionals and agencies. Informal or 'natural' supports would include all of the many forms of everyday helpfulness and assistance ordinary people freely provide to each other in daily life.

There have commonly been instances in which this partnering was not beneficial. Some guiding principles may give us a better chance of reducing that risk and of producing more optimal results in partnering of this kind. Every person's life experience is unique, so being able to consider some universal principles such as the following enables interested people to carefully weigh what would be optimal for a given person.

1. The use of natural supports and formal supports are not necessarily mutually exclusive i.e. in principle both can be beneficially used at the same time and in conjunction with each other, though often for quite different purposes.
2. While formal and natural supports can, in principle, be blended into an overall individual support arrangement it is important to remember that 'one size does not fit all.' To be effective, they must be carefully combined with the needs and priorities of the person being paramount.
3. Both natural and formal supports are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. The proficient and beneficial combined use of natural and formal supports will arise from each being shaped to optimally address the person's wellbeing both singly and in concert with each other.
4. The goal of any combined support arrangement should not simply be to maintain a person's life as it is, but to mobilise these supports in engaging and addressing the ultimate potentials of the person, as there is always a real risk that such supports simply preserve 'what is' rather than 'what could be.'
5. The pursuit of intentionally 'imagining better' as a regular element of the building of 'what could be' in a person's life will generate the positive vision needed to guide both natural and formal supports.

6. If natural and formal supporters are to partner effectively and do not share common values, purposes and ethical obligations to the person being supported, they may work at cross purposes to each other rather than consciously unite their efforts in the ultimate interests of the person concerned.
7. When designing a given combined support arrangement, it is important that natural support be the foundation of the arrangement and that formal supports be secondary in order that the person concerned remain embedded first in community rather than have the person become stranded and isolated within formal systems and apart from community.
8. Given that every human being is conceivably a potential natural supporter and that formal supports are usually much less abundant and reliable than natural supports, it is better to rely on natural supports principally rather than on formal ones.
9. The person who is the focus of the potential partnering of formal and natural supports should, in concert with any chosen allies, ultimately govern the nature of the partnering, rather than be held hostage to priorities and agendas that are not their own.
10. Both natural and formal supports are subject to all of the inherent limitations and shortcomings of human beings and their efforts. It is important to intentionally reduce and offset these limits and shortcomings by safeguarding the quality of the partnership and therefore the benefits to the person.

Given that people's lives do not remain stable and are subject to all manner of potential changes, it is important that any such partnership take the time to regularly update and renew itself. One way to do so would be to return to these principles as guidance in refashioning the partnership should it be beneficial to do so.