

# Natural Supports

What are they? What are the benefits? How to identify and develop them?

## What Are Natural Supports?

According to the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, natural supports are personal associations and relationships typically developed in the community that enhance the quality of life for individuals. Natural supports may include family members, friends, neighbors, and others in the community or organizations that serve the general public who provide voluntary support to an individual ...”<sup>1</sup>

## What Natural Supports Are Not?

The primary role of people in a person’s natural support network is to nurture and support. Natural Supports are “voluntary,” which means that no person should be forced to provide natural support. Individuals who receive services also have a choice about whether they want to receive natural support from a particular person. The determination should be done on an individualized basis.

## What Are The Benefits?

For individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, natural supports result in a better quality of life and capacity for living independently (or interdependently) as productive, contributing members of the community.

## Identify Natural Supports

Individuals with developmental disabilities and their families must be intentional about identifying and developing natural supports. A conscious decision to get involved in activities to meet and engage people and establish relationships must be made.

Some ways to identify natural supports may include:

- Engaging with family and friends
- Joining organizations (e.g. religious, social, civic, and service groups)
- Participating in recreation and leisure activities (e.g. fitness classes, bowling league or other recreational sports teams, art/music classes at a community center, etc.)
- Participating in community activities (e.g. book fairs, festivals, arts and crafts events, etc.)
- Volunteering
- Working

## Develop Natural Supports

There is no single method for developing natural supports. Some things to keep in mind include:

- **Be Brave and Take Risks**  
Developing natural supports requires a willingness to be exposed despite the possibility of rejection. It’s not always comfortable, but it’s necessary.
- **Be Persistent**  
Some of the natural supports identified will not materialize. That’s okay. Try again.
- **Recognize that it takes time**  
Natural supports don’t occur overnight. Give them time to evolve.

<sup>1</sup> Ohio Administrative Code § 5123:2-9-06(B)(14).

**See Reverse Side for Examples of Natural Supports**



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## “DIANE”

*Diane is a happy 54-year-old woman who lives with her 83-year-old mother, Marlene. A few years ago, Marlene had to stop driving due to health issues. Diane loves to attend church. Diane has said that attending church makes her happy because she is surrounded by friends. After Marlene quit driving, Diane started carpooling with her neighbor Karen to church every Sunday, but Karen moved out of state a month ago. Diane is unable to drive and has not been able to go to church. Beverly, a member of Diane’s church, noticed that Diane had been absent and decided to give her a call. When Diane told Beverly why she had not been attending, Beverly immediately suggested that Diane schedule a ride on the church van. Diane is back at church and is happy again.*

## “NATE”

*Nate is a vibrant four year old who loves baseball. This summer, the kids in the neighborhood want to form a t-ball league through the local recreation commission. Several of the kids and coaches have invited Nate to play. Nate is desperate to play, but his mother, Patty, is worried because Nate has a heart condition among other issues. She’s also worried about how the other kids will treat him. But Nate’s determined to play and make friends. A neighbor suggests that Patty contact the recreation commission to discuss accommodations for Nate. After meeting with the recreation commission and the team coaches, the league was able to make accommodations so that Nate could fully participate. Nate fulfilled his dream and was able to play in most of the games. Patty’s fears were diminished. She was astonished by how much support the other kids showed Nate and by how much Nate has blossomed.*

## Examples of Natural Supports

- **Sharing an apartment with a friend or family member**
- **Using a buddy in the workplace to learn social norms**
- **Carpooling with a neighbor, coworker, or classmate**
- **Participating in sports/fitness through local recreation department**
- **Participating in a student organization (i.e., Art Club, 4-H Club, Student Government)**
- **Participating in neighborhood association events (i.e., craft fair, clean-up, parties)**
- **Participating in youth group activities at church (i.e., retreats, sleepovers, choir)**
- **Volunteering (i.e., animal shelter, tutor, walk/run)**

## Opportunities to Develop Natural Supports

Visit the [DD Council’s website](#) for additional resources on natural supports.

