



## It takes a village to raise a child

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[www.interchange.org.au](http://www.interchange.org.au)

There is an old African proverb that says 'It takes a village to raise a child.' Although we try to cope as independently as possible we still need that village in our modern day life. So, if it takes a village to raise a child, what does it take to raise a child with a disability?

Many families are able to provide the care for their loved ones. However, the physical and emotional strain can be overwhelming without some outside support such as respite.

Often parents of a child or a young person with a disability don't view themselves as carers and may feel they don't have any other choice. It is important for carers to look to trusted contacts like family, friends, work colleagues and respite service organisations to form their own 'village'. These trusted contacts, with the right training, help ease the stress of a caring role.

National information taken from a Carers NSW 2007 Summary Paper states the benefits that carers felt when receiving regular respite care;

*"Some carers reported reduced stress, more time for other relationships and prevention of deterioration in their own physical and, particularly, mental health as the positive outcomes of respite. Some reported that respite enabled them to work, maintain a balance in their lives, or to have time to relax, catch up on sleep or 'recharge the batteries'." (Carers NSW 2007)*

What is often needed for parents or carers, to check back into life, is time to pick up a book or sit down with a cup of coffee and have the peace of mind that your child is in a safe and stimulating environment.

Interchange is an organisation that helps to ease the pressure on families who are living with a child or young person with a disability and also provides an opportunity for them to develop interests and socialise in a new setting. This national, not-for-profit provides respite to families through volunteers and staff.

Interchange was realised over 30 years ago as a collaborative effort during a time when there was no available respite care on a regular basis and families were struggling to provide progressive care for both their child with a disability and their other children.

There are two main programs that each aim to provide flexible options for respite and social opportunities to those children or young people involved.

The 'Host Program' at Interchange aims to provide a consistent, high quality service to families by matching a child or young person with a host volunteer who has care of them on a regular basis. This can be for a day or a weekend and usually takes place once a month. The focus is on the child developing a relationship with a host family and enjoying either daily activities or special organised outings. There is a minimum twelve-month commitment needed by the host volunteer or family to ensure that the child they are matched with can enjoy a stable and familiar environment.

Interchange also organises a wide range of volunteer assisted recreational, social and support programs for children and young people with a disability and their families. The range of programs include; school holiday programs, youth/young adult groups, children's and family camps, sibling activities, parental support groups and family activities. The fun activities offered to the children in the programs can be a trip to the local swimming pool, watching a sporting match or even a picnic in the park. The programs provide fantastic opportunities for friendships and recreational experiences as well as giving families a break or much needed support.

Interchange aims to carefully recruit, train and retain volunteers to assist in both the host and recreation programs. The preparation of host volunteers consists of practical orientation sessions. Parents of the child entering the program are also invited along to these orientation sessions which forms parts of the match assessment. Parents and potential carers are encouraged to discuss the effects of disability on family life and the benefit of respite. It is the parents of the child with a disability who are the experts and

they can provide the specific information about the best way to care for their child. Interchange staff take an active role in the matching procedure and provide ongoing support to the host volunteer and the family. There is a strong community feeling at Interchange and staff promote ongoing communication between host volunteers and families to ensure that the care and best interests of the child are maintained.

Volunteers who are part of the Interchange programs are wholly committed to providing happy, exciting and positive experiences for the children who are in their care. Volunteers can be a couple, single and may or may not have children of their own. All volunteers speak lovingly of the time spent with their host child and always feel that their family time has been enriched because of the host experience. Children in the hosting program share activities with the host child and, in turn, understand and learn about children and young people with all abilities. It is a growing and learning experience for all – there are some families that have been hosting a child for over 20 years. A host family for 18 years Jan M knows the joys of being a host volunteer;

*“Over the 18 years we have been hosting Rhys, our families have cared for and supported each other which has made a real difference for all of us. I know he calls me his ‘Host Mum’ but I no longer see it as hosting. Rhys and his family are now an integral part of our lives and we thoroughly enjoy the time he spends with us.”*

For many families who are caring for a child or young person with a disability life is unpredictable and planning ahead can be very difficult. Major changes in daily living arrangements may be imposed on families without warning. Emergency situations including unexpected hospital admissions may occur and a much needed respite or babysitting arrangement might be changed or cancelled.

Having a child with a disability also affects interpersonal relationships with family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues. For some, strong supportive friendships will be made whilst for others the effect will be a sense of loneliness or of isolation.

Parents of a child or a young person with a disability need to keep looking to further the support network in their ‘village’ for more respite options. This may be done by training a trusted family member or friend through an Interchange volunteer training program or asking them to attend a professional information session. Local community centres such as a maternal healthcare centre can provide information on free

courses or parental support groups. Staying informed about options as a full-time carer can mean a greater and fuller life for you and your child.

The opportunities that organised, regular respite care offer to families living with a child or young person with a disability are endless. It may be the perfect chance to have dinner with a spouse or partner, watch a movie that you have been meaning to see for some time or perhaps you would like to keep it as a day that you can just put your feet up! It may also give you a chance to spend time with other children that will enjoy your full attention. Interchange understands that it is important for the family unit to have regular breaks from their role as full-time carers. They also understand how important it is to you that your child is extending their social contacts, friendships and life experiences. As a parent, Sandra L comments;

*“To me, Interchange is so much more than a support service, it is a way of life! Amazing volunteers, wonderful friends, many fantastic experiences and fun times plus the opportunity to have a regular break – that’s what Interchange has meant to both me and my daughter over the years.”*

Interchange also works to encourage families who have a child or young person with a disability from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to access our services. Remember, we need volunteers to ensure that our respite services can continue to be offered to many more families.

More information is available on our website at [www.interchange.org.au](http://www.interchange.org.au) or via phone 1300 300 436.

#### REFERENCE:

*Carers NSW (2007), ‘Respite Reconsidered: A discussion of key issues and future directions for carer respite’, summary report available at <http://www.carersnsw.asn.au/>*