

MEMORIES OF EASTER WEEKEND, 2015

The importance of MyTime support friendships

Rachel Shambrook shares the story of the amazing support her family received from her MyTime friends during a traumatic and high profile event.

Few parents could imagine what it is like to go through the experience of your child, particularly a child with additional needs, going missing in the bush – the unknown of “Where is my child...?”, “Why hasn’t he been found...?”, “What if he doesn’t make it...?” and “What will I do if he is never found...?”.

For me and my family, such were the events of our 2015 Easter family holiday when my son Luke Shambrook went missing at Fraser Camping Ground, Lake Eildon National Park. The traumatic experience lasted five days and four nights.

We were camping with family and friends, all of whom know Luke very well. Luke, despite his significant additional needs, is just another member of our group; he very much belongs, enjoys the regular holiday and being part of the group. When Luke went missing on his adventure, it became a much publicised, national and global media event.

By the end of the first day my anxiety, stress and the ‘what ifs...’, were heightened, followed by thoughts of what will he do over-night, lost, all by himself, in the dark, with no food, shelter or drink. As parents, going to bed on that first night somehow just didn’t seem right when our child was somewhere out in the bush, cold, wet, hungry and thirsty. Yet to sit up all night wondering about his whereabouts was not right either, given that rest (sleep was unlikely) was much needed to ensure we were able to get through whatever was to eventuate the next day.

The escalating stress and anxiety was such that I went into survival mode, not really thinking, just operating on ‘automatic pilot’ and hoping against all odds that Luke would be found alive.

Over the five days, I really just existed by focusing on remaining calm outwardly, while inwardly dealing with the rising stress levels, and yet also hoping ‘against all odds’ and praying. I also passed on every ounce of information about Luke and his additional needs, in the hope it might just make a difference to him being found.

So what was it that got me and my family through the experience of Luke going missing for 5 long days?

Initially, it was the quick response and rallying around by our friends; so many of them from my local MyTime groups.

I belong to two such MyTime groups which meet fortnightly and from week to week I greatly look forward to our get-togethers. The MyTime members have become very good friends and I ‘wouldn’t be without them’. The support my family and I received from these friends when Luke went missing for almost 5 days was amazing to say the least; almost beyond words.

When Luke went missing at 9.30am, on Good Friday, our ‘MyTime’ friends travelled several hours to be beside me and my family to offer much needed hugs, practical support and share our emotional load. I didn’t need to explain our situation or how I was feeling as they too have children with additional needs.

They know the challenges and complexities of having a child with additional needs and can relate to the difficulties of daily life. This was so evident over those 5 days when Luke was missing and hope of finding him alive was fading fast. They were in for the ‘long haul’, ready to help and support in any way possible.

I asked myself, why did they drive all that way, putting their own holiday weekend on hold and sacrificing their own precious family time? Why did they come, with their support of food and activities for Luke’s siblings and the other kids in our group? Why did they?

Because they understood. They had something in common!

When Luke was found alive after 5 days, hypothermic and dehydrated, my MyTime friends were there to celebrate with us. If the outcome of Luke’s adventure had not been the miracle that it was, I have no doubt that these same friends would have been there then as well.

In the days, weeks and months since, our MyTime friends have continued to stand by me, offering practical support, gifts, friendship and so many other things. They have continued to be there for me during the ‘aftermath’ which has been long and hard, offering a ‘listening ear’ and that shared understanding. My heartfelt thanks goes to each and every one who continue to support me and my family to this very day.

MyTime groups provide support for mothers, fathers, grandparents and anyone caring for a child with a disability or chronic medical condition. MyTime groups provide facilitated peer support to families raising children with complex needs. Peer support groups provide an opportunity for people who are living similar experiences to share those experiences and support each other. They typically consist of a group of people who share a similar – but not necessarily identical – life experience. Peer support groups expose people to varied ways of reacting to and coping with their challenges, give them a chance to share positive experiences, and lead to an increased sense of belonging and wellbeing.

For more information about MyTime or to find a group near you go to the website www.mytime.net.au or contact Genevieve O’Connor on 03 9388 1599 or email gen@playgroup.org.au.