

Circles of Adults

Overview description

Circle of Adults is a structured approach to group consultation which was developed by Derek Wilson and Colin Newton (Inclusive Solutions). It is an in-depth, reflective problem-solving process intended to support teams of adults in schools who work with children and young people with social, emotional and mental health needs. It was specifically designed for students who are at risk of exclusion.

During a Circle of Adults, the group are guided through a set of questions to reach a deeper understanding of the child or young person's behaviour and unmet needs in a safe climate to allow and encourage the group to find its own solutions.

It requires two facilitators and, ideally, 6-8 members of staff (and/or professionals) who support the child or young person. One facilitator leads the process by asking questions while the second facilitator captures the discussion through words and graphics on a large sheet of paper on the wall. The full process takes 90 minutes.

Key Messages

'When in doubt, build a team'

'Circles are a symbol of cooperation and collaboration where everyone is equal, with the right to be listened to, accepted and respected'

During a Circle of Adults, there are 10 time-limited stages that facilitators will guide participants through.

STAGES

- 1. Ground rules** Establish clear boundaries to enhance the feelings of safety in the group.
- 2. Problem presentation** The problem presenter describes the student. Other adults who know the student well also provide info and ask questions. The aim is to understand the student from the perspective of the adult-child relationship rather than solely within the child themselves. Info is recorded graphically.
- 3. Explore relationships** The student's relationships with significant others are explored, (eg friends, teachers, support staff, family).
- 4. Organisational Issues** Whole school processes are considered – what are helping/hindering the present situation? This is also an opportunity to highlight teacher strengths.

5. The child's voice	At the start of the circle a person is asked to volunteer to take on the role of the student's voice – listening from the perspective of the student, what might s/he be feeling? What might they say to the group if they were here?
6. Synthesis	The facilitator feeds back info gained so far – highlighting emerging themes
7. Hypothesis	Participants offer deeper understandings of what has been learnt about the student to try to make sense of what is happening for them.
8. Strategies	Strategies are brainstormed – building on people's suggestions and the child's vice where possible.
9. First steps	A series of 'first steps' are identified that the problem presenter will take over the next few days. A coach is appointed to 'check in' with them during this time.
10. Round of words	Each participant is asked for a word that reflects their experience of the process. A visual summary is retained by the group.

Evidence-base

Wilson and Newton (2006) cite their own evaluations of the approach and comparable teacher support groups. They found that participants of a Circle of Adults felt supported and had a better understanding of the young person which led to the use of effective strategies for the students who were discussed.

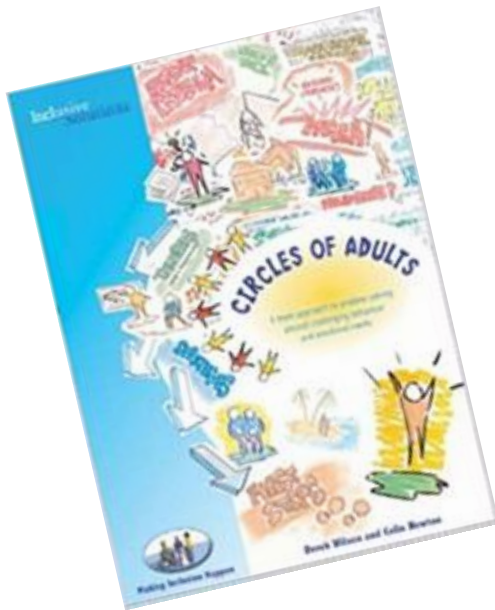
Grahamslaw and Henson (2015) explored participant's perceptions of Circle of Adults. They found that the approach was a useful problem-solving tool, particularly when a problem needed an in-depth exploration.

Turner and Gulliford (2020) found that staff who had participated in a Circle of Adults reported greater self-efficacy, more success implementing agreed actions and enhanced group cohesion, task focus, insights and empathy.

Useful Resources and Links

The Inclusive Solutions website includes information about training in this approach. It has a link to a book which outlines the approach (see below), as well as the opportunity to purchase a video to demonstrate the process, feedback from

participants and other useful information - [Problem Solving | Whole Team Visioning | Child Psychology \(inclusive-solutions.com\)](#)



Wilson, D. and Newton, C. (2006). *Circles of Adults; A team approach to problem-solving around challenging behaviour and emotional needs*. Inclusive Solutions. Available to purchase on this link - [Circles of Adults - Book \(inclusive-solutions.com\)](#)

Grahamslaw, L. & Henson, L. H. (2015). *Solving problems through circles*. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31:2, 111-126.

Turner, J. & Gulliford, A. (2020). *Examining the Circle of Adults process for Children Looked After: the role of self-efficacy and empathy in staff behaviour change*. *Educational Psychology in Practice*.