

Circle of Friends

Overview Description

Key Aims:

- Increasing the level of acceptance and inclusion of an individual
- Increasing the active attempts of a young person's peer group to intervene positively in that person's life
- To increase opportunities for the individual to make friends in or outside of the actual circle
- To increase insight and understanding for the individual, into their own feelings and behaviour
- To provide the individual with a wider range of choices and more sense of control over their behaviour in a range of situations
- To provide a support team to actively work with and relate to a vulnerable or challenging member of the community

Circle of friends is an approach to enhancing the inclusion, in a mainstream setting, of any young person (known as 'the focus child'), who is experiencing difficulties in school or college because of a disability, personal crisis or because of their challenging behaviour towards others.

The 'circle of friends' approach works by mobilising the young person's peers to provide support and engage in problem solving with the person in difficulty. 'Circle of friends' works by creating the intention to build relationships around the person who is vulnerable to exclusion. It is a way of building community that recognises the central importance of relationships and community connections in all our lives – for our psychological well-being and for our physical health and resilience. The message is simple – relationships are what matter most – whatever labels we have been given.

More information and resources can be found here:

<https://inclusive-solutions.com/circles/circle-of-friends/>

Reference: Hughes, T and Pollen, W. (1994). What is a circle of friends?. Retrieved from <https://inclusive-solutions.com/circles/circle-of-friends/what-is-a-circle-of-friends/>

Circle of Friends Steps

STEP ONE – Establish the support of the school and the acceptance of the parents and child for the approach.

STEP TWO – Gain commitment from headteacher or a member of SLT plus that of the individual who will be carrying out the weekly circle work, likely to be either the class teacher or form tutor. The commitment is essential and without this we would be doubtful of a longer-term support circle becoming established.

STEP THREE – Work with the whole class or tutor group to define the 'problem', evoke empathy, enlist their help and affirm their role in helping move things forward.

STEP FOUR – Share the content of the above session with the focus pupil.

STEP FIVE – Meet with the circle and child together to reiterate the above and discuss ways forward.

STEP SIX – Meetings are held at regular intervals to continue and strengthen the circle, celebrate progress and problem solve as necessary.

Research Base

The Circle of friends' approach promotes the inclusion of individuals who face the greatest risk of rejection of isolation from the community in which they live.

Research evidence for the importance of a wide and varied cycle of relationships in maintaining not just our physical health and resilience continues to accumulate.

Evidence is increasingly emerging that pupils with difficulties develop a wider range of competencies in the key areas of cognitive, academic, language and social development when their education takes place in an inclusive mainstream setting. More than this, there is clear evidence of benefits for all pupils educated in an inclusive school (Bunch, 1999.; MacGregor & Vogelsberg, 2000).

Ref: Newton and Wilson (2005)

BEFORE YOU START – Committed staff

“It is essential that a key member of staff understands and is committed to using the approach with young person who is the focus of concern. The key staff member will need to be able to give sufficient time to supporting the circle of friends in the weekly meetings that will follow the first meeting of the focus child’s class or tutor group. Between 30 and 40 minutes each week will be needed. Some teachers have reported that it has worked much better where two members of staff have been involved from the outset, often one being a TA, providing mutual support” (Newton & Wilson, 2005).

The Whole-Class meeting – Recruiting Volunteers

60 minutes should be allowed for this meeting to enable the class to build empathy for the focus child.

The discussion is led by an adult facilitator – it often helps if this is someone the class is less familiar with. The class teacher and / or whoever will be maintaining this work should also be present. The focus child is not required to be in the recruitment session.

- **Introduction:** The facilitator introduces themselves.
- **Aim of the meeting:** Explain why the meeting has been organised e.g. To discuss the behaviour of the focus child and how the class can help them. Explain that the focus person knows the class is meeting and has agreed to it.
- **Agree ground rules:** e.g. confidentiality, trust, honesty. Check understanding of ‘confidentiality’ and explain how ‘honesty’ will enable the class and focus child to get the best out of the meeting.

- **Gaining a picture of the focus child:** The class is asked for positives about the focus child (things they do well) then the things the focus child finds difficult (when things don't go so well). Positives and difficulties should be captured on a flip chart or equivalent for all to see.
- **Role of friendship and building empathy with focus child:** This could be through the 'Circle of Support' exercise or through friendship-based discussions in which the class think about different types of relationship that surround them as individuals. **Sensitivity is required here as there may be other children who have gaps in their 'circles of support'.**
- **Ways to help:** The class are asked to make a list of 'what could they do to help the focus child'.
- **Explain concept of Circle of Friends and what's involved.**
- **Recruitment of Volunteers:** Ask the group who would like to volunteer to be involved. 6 – 8 people will be needed. Avoid only choosing those who are perceived as behaving well by adults.
- **Next Steps:** Explain what will happen next and when the first Circle of Friends meeting will take place.

The first meeting of the circle

A session typically lasts 30 – 40 mins. The session is led by an adult facilitator.

- **Introduction:** The facilitator introduces themselves and reminds everyone why they are there.
- **Agree ground rules:** e.g. confidentiality, one person talking at a time (a talking stick may help), listen to each other. Boundaries should be very clear and include how group members should deal with disclosures from the focus person they are supporting.
- **Agree aims of group:** e.g. to support [name of focus child] to [name the type of support the focus child has agreed].
- **Support Declarations:** Ask group members to tell the focus child why they volunteered to be in his / her circle.
- **Celebrate positives:** Ask the group to share positive things about the focus child.
- **Examine negatives:** The group next suggested a few things that the focus person could work on.
- **Generate tactics and supportive ideas:** Brainstorm strategies of things that could help with the negatives.
- **Agree which strategies to try** and gain commitment from a named person in the 'Circle of Friends' who will support the focus person in doing this. Repeat back what's agreed and capture on flip chart.
- **Agree group name.** Names for the circle group are suggested - focus person selects. Don't include the name of the child in the group name.
- **Describe follow-up arrangements / meeting** and what to do if someone needs some support.

Subsequent Meetings of the Circle (Structure)

- Warm up/ settling in exercise
- Good news (situation with focus child in where it went well)
- Bad news (discuss any barriers, brainstorm solutions)
- Target setting

Repeat 'Circle of Friends' at regular intervals (e.g. weekly) to strengthen peer support, celebrate progress and continue to problem solve.

Ref: Newton, C., & Wilson, D. (2005). *Creating circles of friends: A peer support and inclusion workbook*. Inclusive Solutions.

Useful links:

https://schools.local-offer.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Circle_of_Friends_Guide.pdf

<https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/WCFEducationServices/info/39/autism-complex-communication-needs-ccn-resources/104/circle-friends>

<https://www.edplace.com/blog/send/how-to-create-a-circle-of-friendship>

<https://inclusive-solutions.com/circles/circle-of-friends/>

References:

Bunch, G. O. (1999). *Inclusion: How to: Essential classroom strategies*. Toronto: Inclusion Press.

MacGregor, G., & Vogelsberg, R. T. (2000). *Inclusive Schooling Practices: Pedagogical and Research Foundations; a Synthesis of the Literature that Informs Best Practices about Inclusive Schooling*. Paul H. Brookes Pub.

Newton, C., & Wilson, D. (2005). *Creating circles of friends: A peer support and inclusion workbook*. Inclusive Solutions.

West Sussex City Council (2020). Circle of friends Guide. Retrieved from <https://schools.local-offer.org/childs-journey/paths-bella/circle-of-friends/>

