

AUTISM OUTREACH TEAM

Circle of Friends

A peer based approach to supporting children
with autistic spectrum disorders in school.

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What follows is intended to provide practical help and guidance to anyone planning to set up a 'circle of friends.' Comments are based on experience in Leicestershire involving seven circles set up to support children with autistic spectrum disorders (6 of whom were being educated in mainstream schools). Comments are based on direct experience in setting up and running circles and on the findings of an evaluation study which investigated the experiences of all those who participated.

INTRODUCING 'CIRCLES OF FRIENDS'

Where did they come from?

'Circles of friends' originated in North America as one of a range of strategies to promote the inclusion into mainstream schools of students with disabilities and difficulties.

What are 'Circles of Friends'?

When a circle is established a group of volunteers meet regularly with the 'focus child' and an adult facilitator. The circle acts as a resource to suggest strategies and set targets to deal with difficulties that have been jointly identified by the members of the circle and the focus child.

What happened in the Leicestershire project?

In the Leicestershire project the process and format adopted was very closely based on that outlined by Newton, Taylor and Wilson (1996), in their work in Nottinghamshire with youngsters with emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, the focus children in the Leicestershire project, ranging in age from 8 to 15, had all been diagnosed as having an autistic spectrum disorder. All had statements and all were supported by the LEA's Autism Outreach Service. Members of the service negotiated and took the lead role in establishing circles, with responsibility gradually being handed over to school staff (after 4-6 meetings of the circle).

The evaluation of the circles was overwhelmingly positive. Significant benefits for the focus children were identified, particularly in terms of improved social integration, higher levels of peer contact and reduced anxiety. All school staff rated the 'circles' as worthwhile or very worthwhile. Circle members also benefited, showing clear pride and pleasure in the process of helping and developing their interpersonal skills.

In trying to identify the lessons to be gained from our experience we have looked firstly at the logistics of getting the circles up and running and secondly at the complexities of managing and facilitating the group process.

THE MAIN STAGES

In setting up a 'Circle of Friends' we go through a number of stages. These consisted of:

- explaining about 'Circle of Friends' and getting permission for involvement from school staff, parents and the 'focus child'
- talking to the whole class or tutor group to recruit volunteers
- starting and continuing with the circles

This paper discusses issues which arose during the Leicestershire project and offers suggestions based on this experience. Practical guidelines for each of the stages are included.

GETTING STARTED

Selecting the school

For outside agencies, particularly when first working with this approach, it is important to pick 'winners' at the outset. Schools which take issues of Personal and Social Education seriously and which actively promote an ethos of community and mutual support are obviously more likely to be sympathetic to both the purpose and the process. We found it helpful to prepare a brief outline of the origins, purpose and practicalities of the approach. (See Guideline 1).

Getting the sequence right

A hierarchy of co-operation and consent is required in order to successfully establish and run a circle. In order to reduce the risk of needlessly investing time and, the danger of raising and dashing hopes, we would suggest the following sequence of negotiation:

1. Headteacher/Head of Department
2. Parents of focus child.
3. Focus child.
4. Prospective circle members.
5. Parents of volunteers selected

Contacting the parents of the focus child

We consider that a personal approach to the parents of the focus child is essential. They need to know clearly what is entailed and to have some realistic idea of possible outcomes: in this respect the term 'circle of friends' is rather misleading in implying that friendships can simply be created by seeking volunteers in this fashion. With hindsight we feel it would have been useful to provide a brief information sheet. (See Guideline 2)

In our particular project we also asked parents whether or not their children knew of their own diagnosis, whether this was known in the community or school and,

if so, whether this label could be mentioned in any discussions. Our experience suggested that it was perfectly possible to run a 'circle' without the diagnostic label. In all cases the peer group demonstrated considerable perception about the nature of the child's difficulties.

Discussion with the focus child

A circle can only be set up and run with the free and informed consent of the focus child. This is an easy principle to state but careful (and subjective) judgement is required in practice. The youngster is dependent on the information provided by the adult and this has to be done in a way which makes it as accessible as possible to the particular youngster. Ready agreement by the child may be based on fantasy about what the circle can offer and what the experience will feel like. Equally, refusal to participate may be based on similar grounds or may be a momentary reaction to the prospect of missing a lunchtime.

Parents of circle members

Particularly in view of the involvement of outside agencies we feel it necessary to provide information to the parents of volunteers and to seek their consent. After discussion with Headteachers it was agreed that we should operate on the basis of what we termed 'negative consent'. A standard letter was sent to the parents of volunteers giving some background information and inviting them to contact the Headteacher with any concerns or questions: consent was presumed if the school did not hear from the parents. (See Guideline 3)

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS - MEETING THE FOCUS CHILD'S CLASS

Our agenda for the first meeting was closely based on that outlined by Newton et al (1996). Whilst the first meeting is an essential first step in the process of establishing a circle we also came to recognise that it was a powerful and valuable activity in its own right. (See Guidelines 4 and 5).

Preparation and planning

It was our clear impression that the first session with the whole class had the potential for making a major impact on peer attitudes to the focus child, regardless of the subsequent establishment of a circle. (Please see the Guideline 4 for an outline to this session.) It was felt that a full hour was necessary to get best value from this session and that some suspension of the usual adult-pupil relationship was required. In this situation it was essential for the adult to establish a spirit of shared responsibility, to emphasise that the class were being invited to help (both the focus child and the adult) and to respect the feelings and suggestions expressed.

Eliciting the positives

Consistently classes showed great insight and creativity in identifying the positive attributes and behaviours of the focus child. Almost always the list was longer

and more diverse than might have been predicted and the process of 'giving credit' in this way also seemed to facilitate the more difficult task of discussing the focus child's difficulties. Our fear that in some circumstances a class might only provide us with negative aspects was never realised.

Listing the difficulties

Though we approached this stage with apprehension the outcomes were invariably positive. The key to the process seemed to be the adult's concern to seek information openly, fairly, and non-judgementally. The most obvious trap to guard against was that of being drawn into an alliance with the class, based on shared disapproval/indignation, so appearing to team up against the focus child.

In practice the class members showed remarkable perceptiveness in identifying the focus children's difficulties (often recognising core autistic features) and significantly improved acceptance and understanding of the focus child. The important ingredients in bringing about these changes seemed to be as follows:-

- it was clearly important (and sometimes a relief) to be able to give voice to concerns about the focus child, and to have these acknowledged.
- the fact that these concerns were taken seriously by an adult (and shared with other class members) in some way validated these feelings - they were not just idiosyncratic and purely personal reactions nor a manifestation of "nastiness" in the child voicing the concern.
- the fact that "it's not just me" seemed to allow some youngsters to take the behaviour of the focus child less personally and engage in less blaming.
- this in turn helped shift perceptions of the focus child and the way that responsibility was attributed: less "bad" or "mad", and more trying to cope with difficulties.

SELECTING THE VOLUNTEERS

Our favoured method for requesting volunteers in confidence was to give the whole class slips of paper and ask them to write their name on this with a 'yes' if they were interested in volunteering or a 'no' if they were not. This happened at the end of the whole class talk and catches the enthusiasm built up during the session. It was explained, at this point, that there would probably be too many volunteers as only 6-8 were required, but that those who were not initially involved would be placed on a reserve list. It was also stressed that if a volunteer did not wish to continue being a member of the 'circle' then they could easily leave.

The responsibility for selecting the 6-8 volunteers who would become members of the 'circle' was left with school staff. However, we did suggest that the group was balanced between children who were very able/and those who had some difficulties.

FIRST MEETING OF THE CIRCLE

House keeping

The first meeting of the circles were often awkward, and some of our focus children were anxious or over excited by the process. Low key but efficient preparations were needed to ensure that accommodation and time would be available, that the group got off to a prompt start and that disturbances were minimised.

Ground rules

For obvious reasons the first meeting was critical in setting the ground rules and establishing a style of working. (See Guideline 6).

Building relationships

The first meeting was also the starting point for the special relationship between the circle and the focus child. The motivation of the circle to help needs to be harnessed and heightened and the focus child needs to hear the acknowledgement of his or her strengths - as well as engage with the group in identifying difficulties which need to be worked on. These were reported back from the whole class discussion as the 'focus child' was not present at that. As far as possible the 'focus child' and 'circle' need to be engaged in a shared responsibility and purpose whose ultimate goal is to help the focus child in day to day situations.

FACILITATING THE PROCESS - HOLDING BACK

A central feature of circles of friends is that they are about peers supporting peers. The adults' role is to facilitate rather than control or lead this process. The natural instinct to teach, direct and protect is something which may need to be held in check and used with discretion if the participants are to assume maximum responsibility and co-operate creatively. A number of tactics helped in this process.

A model "agenda"

At the outset circle meetings were structured around a simple framework. (See Guideline 7). At the core was a problem solving routine but the sequence of discussion points and content was intended to help the process and sustain the motivation of all involved parties. By different routes a number of the circles gradually evolved a format which also allowed circle members to contribute their own "good news" and "bad news" and to receive peer recognition and support.

Allocating roles

In addition to a simple framework for conducting the meeting in some circles it was found helpful to allocate clear roles (and rotate these meeting by meeting) e.g. a chairperson, in order to strengthen the ground rules about speaking and

listening. This also helped to involve all circle members and even out levels of participation.

Pre-requisite skills

The circle has to operate as a group, coming to joint decisions and courses of action. This involves complex social, emotional and intellectual demands and was a great challenge for the youngest circle of year 3 children. Experience of group based, co-operative discussion work, using approaches such as circle time (Bliss and Tetley), would clearly form a good foundation for participation in a circle of friends.

FACILITATING THE PROCESS - STEPPING IN

The level of active intervention and guidance which is needed at any point in a particular circle is a matter for individual judgement and constant review. The adult does retain responsibility (and power) for determining the overall boundaries and direction of the circle and for the well-being of the participants. On the basis of experience and the outcomes of the evaluation a number of guidelines can be identified:

New skills

Participants in the circle may require skills which individuals lack or which are intrinsically difficult. For example, the challenge of providing constructive criticism, whilst sustaining the relationship is one which is hard for most people and one which a number of circle members were aware of struggling with.

Providing personal support

The dynamics of a small group mean that emotions and reactions can be intensified, particularly when the issues being dealt with are personal. On occasions very strong and negative reactions were expressed by some focus children towards specific members of the circle. These individuals needed support in dealing with their own sense of responsibility and their own reactions to hurtful remarks and situations.

Taking control

On occasions the group process developed in unexpected and unhelpful directions. In two circles the focus children began to see the groups as existing solely to serve their needs and they were not sensitive to conventions of reciprocity or the cues which showed growing resentment amongst circle members. We have also heard of another circle (involving a non-autistic youngster) where the circle members come to be dominated and used by a very powerful focus child. In these circumstances the adult needs to resume direct control, identify what is happening and re-negotiate the direction and goal of the circle.

KEEPING THE CIRCLE MOTIVATED

For some members of circles the act of trying to help another person is its own reward, and in the longer term it is hoped that a more balanced, mutually rewarding relationship can develop. In the medium term, or where a 'self sustaining' relationship does not emerge, circle members can feel that the enterprise is a one way street - all 'give', and little 'get'. A number of strategies can help in sustaining motivation:

Recognition

It is important that all members of the circle (including the focus child) receive recognition and encouragement for the efforts they make. The fact that they may sometimes feel they are getting nowhere, or are receiving no thanks from the focus child, needs to be openly acknowledged. The circle's long term willingness to stick with the focus child may carry a vital message for that child: in the longer term its impact may be as powerful as the specific skills and strategies targeted by the group.

Attainable targets

Circles sometimes set themselves extremely ambitious targets - and manage to achieve them (as when one circle decided to refrain from any 'play' fighting so as to prevent the focus child being drawn into real fights). Achieving targets and seeing change and progress in the circle child seems to be a major source of satisfaction. On occasions the adult will need to intervene to help the group set realistic and attainable targets. The adult may also need to help the group negotiate with school staff to ensure that their chosen strategies are acceptable and supported.

Meeting the circle members' need

Two of the projects' circles have explicitly moved towards becoming mutual support groups. In the evaluation, circle participants quite often referred to their use of the circle to resolve personal difficulties causing them concern. Adults need to be aware of the circles' potential for this sort of support and, if possible, to involve the focus child in the process of helping another circle member. Though it poses ethical dilemmas, in some circumstances it may be appropriate for the circle to meet without the focus child. This seems particularly useful where the focus child is giving relatively little back to the group or actively rejecting their attempts to help.

It is important for the facilitator of the circle to allow the circle to evolve in its' own way whilst keeping sight of the original aims.

We hope that this paper encourages you to consider 'Circles of Friends' as a strategy for use in you particular situation. We are extremely positive about all

the circles we have been involved in. If you would like any further information please contact:

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References

Newton C, Taylor G and Wilson D (1996) Circles of friends: An inclusive approach to meeting emotional and behavioural needs *Educational Psychology in Practice* 11:4

Bliss T and Tetley J (1994) *Circle Time* Lane Duck Enterprises: Bristol

Guideline 1

An introduction to Circles of Friends - a staff guide A handout for staff members.

These brief notes will give you some background information and an idea of what would be entailed in setting up and running a Circle of Friends in your school.

1. Circles of Friends originated in North America as one of a range of strategies to encourage the inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream settings. Circles have been used to support children with a wide range of disabilities and have also been used in the community.
2. A circle usually consists of 6-8 volunteers (most often from the same class or tutor group) who meet regularly (usually weekly) with the 'focus child' and an adult. The circle has three main tasks: to offer encouragement and recognition for successes and progress; to identify difficulties, set targets and devise strategies for achieving targets; and to help put these ideas into practice.
3. Setting up a circle includes the following steps:
 - gaining the support and agreement of the focus child and his or her parents
 - a meeting with the whole class (which the focus child does not attend) aimed at recruiting volunteers, which takes roughly 30-40 minutes
 - informing the parents of volunteers and gaining their agreement to their children's participation
 - weekly meetings of the circle, the focus child, and an adult facilitator (taking 20-30 minutes).

Guideline 2

An introduction to Circles of Friends - A parents' guide.

1. What is a 'Circle of Friends'?

A circle is a group of 6-8 youngsters who have volunteered to meet regularly with your child and a teacher (usually this is for 20-30 minutes per week).

2. What's a Circle for and what happens?

The circle has 4 main aims:-

- to create a support network for your child
- to provide your child with encouragement and recognition for any achievements and progress
- to work with your child in identifying difficulties and coming up with practical ideas to help sort out these difficulties
 - to help put these ideas into practice.

The adult is there to help the circle, but the work is done by the youngsters with your child - coming up with ideas, trying things out, reporting back.

The circle can't provide instant friendship - but we hope that it will help your child to build closer and better relationships with other children.

3. How will it be set up?

The members of your child's class would be asked if they are interested in volunteering to be in the circle. Your child's teacher will explain to them what this involves - usually this is best done when your child is not actually in the room.

We almost always end up with more volunteers than we need and selection will be carried out by your child's class teacher. The group then meets regularly with an adult.

4. Will it help?

Obviously we can't guarantee this. However, Circles of Friends have been used quite widely in North America and are increasingly being used in this country. As far as we know, Leicestershire was the first Local Education Authority to use them with youngsters with autistic spectrum disorders. We evaluated the first 7 circles that have been run locally and results were very positive indeed:-

- children at the centre of the circles have shown improved behaviour and less worry about mixing with their classmates
- the volunteers have been very good at coming up with creative and practical ideas.
 - most volunteers have been keen to continue their involvement

- school staff have found them very worthwhile.

Please contact _____ if you would like to discuss 'Circles' in more detail or if you have any questions or concerns.

Guideline 3

The whole class meeting - recruiting volunteers.

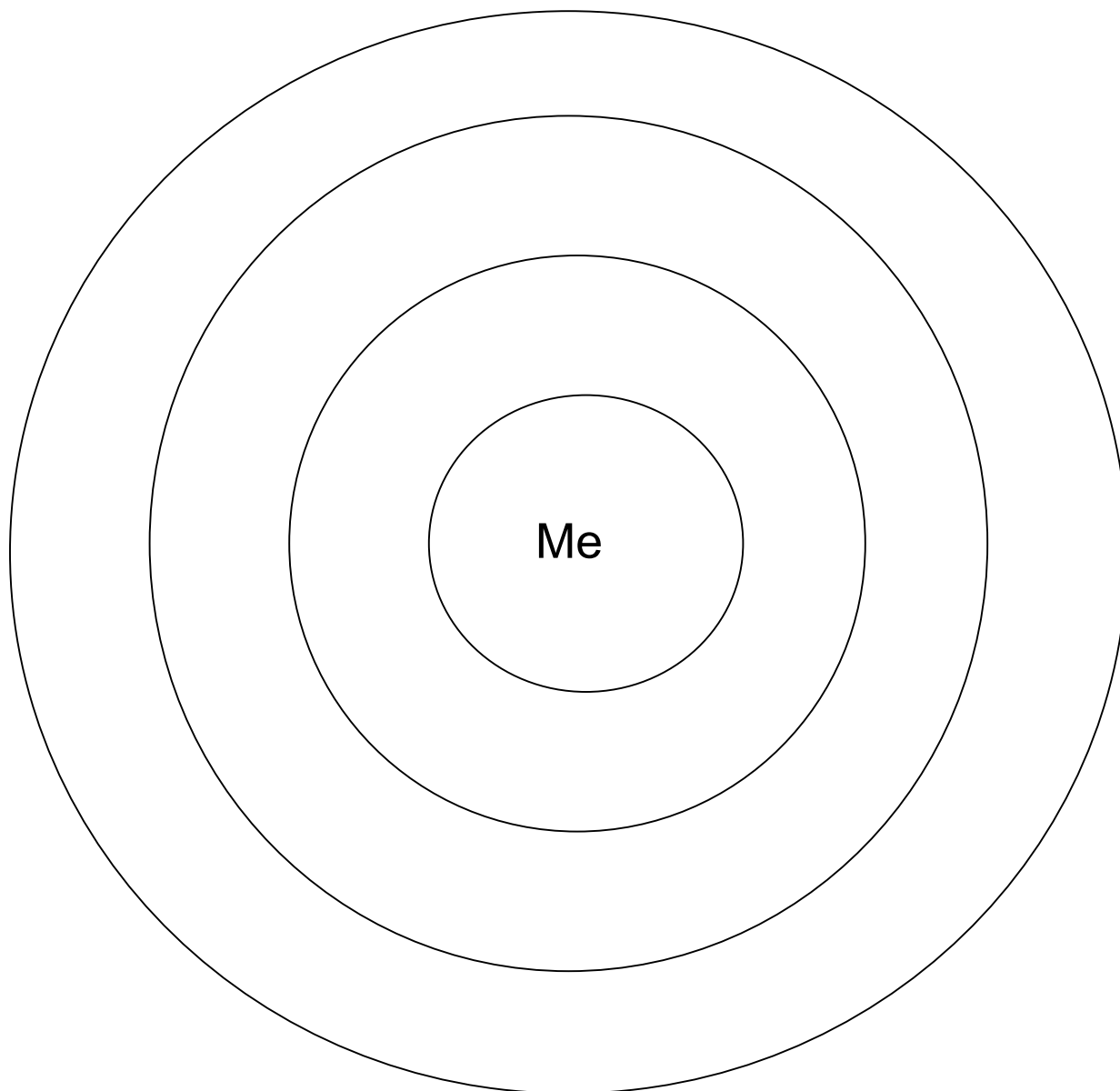
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|---|---|
| (1) Introduction | a) Explain your involvement with focus child.
b) Explain your interest in how youngsters get on with each other and how they can help each other |
| (2) Grounds Rules | a) Listen to each other.
b) Treat each other with respect |
| (3) Need to talk about focus pupil | a) Emphasise this is unusual (to talk behind someone's back)
b) Focus pupil knows this is happening.
c) Reason is that we need your help to think about ways in which focus pupil can be helped. (Stress need for/value of their insights). |
| (4) Need for confidentiality (explain) | a) No references to who said what about who.
b) Emphasise that adults are also bound by this confidentiality. |
| (5) Listing positives | a) Before talking about difficulties, focus on positives – good at ..., nice things about ...what the focus child does well
b) List all contributions on a flip chart. |
| (6) Difficulties | a) Explain you've heard about some but probably not all.
b) Ask for descriptions of behaviour – list.
c) Describe sort of person she/he is – list. |
| (7) Discussion of friendships | a) Display diagram (see guideline 4)
b) Introduce the circles.
(1) Me – You.
(2) People who you love and who love you.
(3) Friends/Acquaintances
(4) People paid to be in your life.

c) Ask for a volunteer and fill in his/her circles on the flip chart. They can ask class members for help/ideas. |
| (8) What would it be like if... | a) Circle 2 and 3 had no people or only one or two in it.

b) How would it feel – list.
c) How would you behave – list.
d) Compare to flip chart from (6). |

(9) What's involved

- a) Explain that you've heard about an idea called 'Circle of Friends' and you are looking to set up a group which will help with '**N's**' difficulties.
- b) Explain what would be required e.g. meeting at lunchtime once a week.
- c) Explain that only 6/7 will be involved
- d) Pass out small pieces of paper. Ask them to think about whether they would like to volunteer, then to write their name on the paper with either a yes or a no. Stress confidentiality and 'no pressure'.
- e) Explain not everyone will be able to do it but
 - may need new people in group at later date.
 - everyone can take responsibility for helping.
 - letter home to all volunteer's parents, explaining about it.



Guideline 4

The first meeting of the Circle

- (1) Introductions
- (2) Re-state ground rules
 - a) Listen to each other
 - b) Treat each other as we would like to be treated
- (3) Reminder re: aims
 - a) - Work with N to help him/her make friend
- To help him identify and sort out difficulties
 - b) To support each other in helping N
- (4) Ask each to state reason for wanting to be in group
- (5) Ask group to list positives (point out that N didn't hear what was said at 1st session)
- ask N to add any to list
- (6) Ask group to list things N needs to work on
 - a) Ask for descriptions of behaviours
 - b) Turn each problem behaviour into a positive target (describing what N should be doing rather than not doing)
 - c) Ask N to add to any of lists a) or b)
 - d) Talk about what would be different if N achieved these targets – for him/her and for others
- (7) Introduce problem solving
 - a) Explain need to work on 1 or 2 targets at a time
 - b) Ask group to decide which target(s) including N in discussion)
Suggest that it may be best to start with something quickly achievable
 - c) Brainstorm possible ways to get to the target
 - d) Select jointly and help group spell out steps
 - e) Agree responsibilities and boundaries (emphasise the N is responsible for own behaviour)
 - f) Emphasise realism about speed of change, set backs etc.
- (8) Agree name for group

- (9) Arrange next meeting

Guideline 5

Subsequent meetings of the Circle

- (1) Warm up/settling in exercise (? ideas)
a) “Warm fuzzy” comments (around circle)
- (2) **Good news**
a) Ask for any situation involving N which went well
(involving or witnessed by the members)
- get detail as to what N said or did
- explore how participants felt
b) Ask for any success in working towards targets
- (3) **Bad news**
a) Discuss any blockages in steps towards target
b) Brainstorm solutions
c) Any other problems
- (4) **Target setting**
a) Maybe more of same, different means to same end, or a
new target
b) Brainstorm solutions (if not already done in 3b)
c) Plan detail and agree responsibility and action.