

Utilizing the Classroom Peer Group to Address Children's Social Needs: An Evaluation of the Circle of Friends Intervention Approach

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The results of a two-phase small-scale evaluation study of the Circle of Friends intervention approach are reported. This approach uses the classroom peer group to improve the social acceptance of a classmate who has special needs. The study participants were 20 children with emotional and behavioral difficulties, ages 6 to 12 years, and their nondisabled classmates. In Phase 1, a between-group design was adopted, with 10 children randomly selected to receive the intervention. In Phase 2, children in the comparison group in Phase 1 received the intervention, and their scores were analyzed across both phases of the study. The intervention appeared to have positive effects on social acceptance by classmates, but few changes were obtained on other measures of perceptions or behavior. These findings support the specificity of social interventions and indicate the potential value of the Circle of Friends for improving social inclusion of children with disabilities.

Most widely accepted models of the factors influencing human behavior stress the interactions of personal and environmental variables. For example, Lewin (1936) developed the formula $B = f(P, E)$ to represent the idea that behavior (B) is a function of personal characteristics (P), environmental factors (E), and the interaction between the two. Bandura (1977) hypothesized that behavior is determined by reciprocal interactions continuously occurring among behavioral, cognitive, and environmental factors. More detailed interactive models have been elaborated in a number of specific areas.

Figure 1 shows an interactive model of social competence in children in which behavioral and cognitive approaches are incorporated. In addition, this model contains circular chains of causality and interactions between individual and environmental influences. Stage 1 at the center of the model draws attention to the influence of cues or stimuli in the social situation on children's perceptions of, and judgments about, their own and others' behavior. Dodge, Coie, and Brakke (1982) found that children who are popular with their peers make more social approaches than other children in the playground but not in the classroom. On the other hand, children who are rejected by their peers make more social approaches in the classroom, where this behavior attracts disapproval. Stage 2 highlights cognitive factors such as the child's skills in perceiving and understanding social situations and his or her skills in solving problems in order to select appropriate behavior. Dodge, Murphy, and Buchsbaum (1984) showed that

children ages 5 to 10 years who were rejected by their peers were more likely than their classmates to perceive hostile intent when viewing videos of ambiguous situations. Dodge et al. (1986) demonstrated that these children are less likely to be proficient in one or more of the stages involved in processing information about a social situation and producing an effective response. These stages include generating a range of possible responses and evaluating the probable consequences of these responses. The behavior selected may be skillfully or unskillfully executed at Stage 3, but the effect on the child's acceptance or rejection by his or her classmates depends on how the classmates interpret it at Stage 4. For example, Graham (1997) reported that behavior that attracts social disapproval (aggression/withdrawal) may be attributed by peers to factors either outside the child's control (the child cannot help it), thus eliciting sympathy and acceptance, or within the child's control (it is the child's "fault"), thus eliciting anger and rejection. The final stage (Stage 5) in the cycle of social interaction shown in this model is the peer group's behavioral response to the child. Peer responses in turn act as cues that the child processes within the context of the ongoing social situation.

To date, such well-articulated and empirically supported models have had comparatively little impact on the design of social skills intervention programs. Farmer, Pearl, and Van Acker (1996) emphasized the extent to which "the developmental contributions of factors other than problematic social behaviors

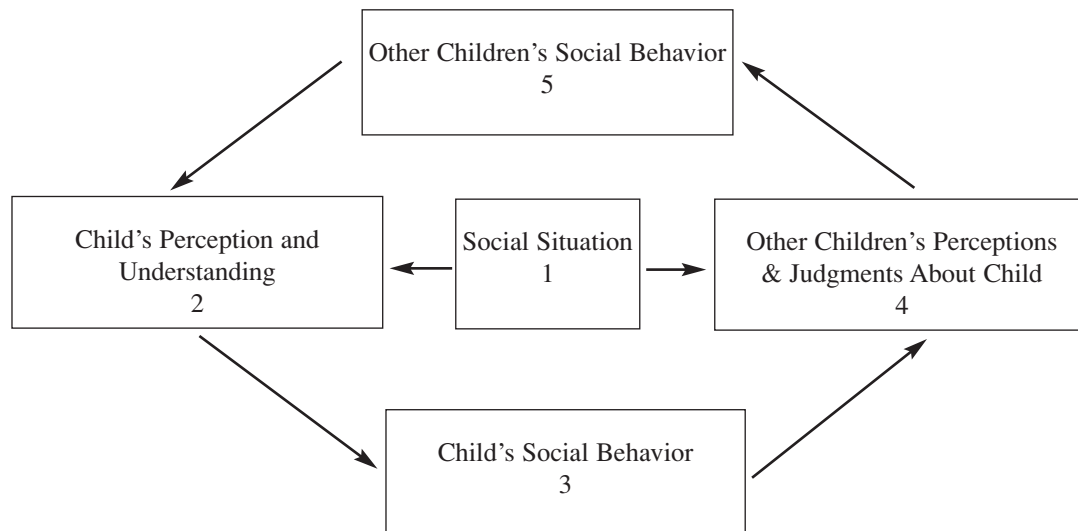


FIGURE 1. A model of social competence in children. *Note.* From “Social Competence in Children,” by K. Dodge, C. Pettit, C. McClasky, and M. Brown, 1986, *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 51. Copyright 1986 by Blackwell Publishers. Adapted with permission.

and cognitions” (p. 233) are overlooked and concluded that “there has been very little effort to systematically utilize classroom social networks in social intervention research” (p. 251). This may be a serious omission in that the outcomes obtained by social skills programs appear to be highly specific to the stage of the Dodge et al. (1986) model at which the intervention program is targeted. This specificity was well illustrated in a study conducted by Bierman and Furman (1984) with four groups of 10- to 12-year-old boys and girls who had low conversational skills and low peer acceptance. One group received individual coaching in conversational skills, a second group received group experience with peers in working toward superordinate goals, a third group received both coaching and the group experience, and a fourth group received no treatment. Only the group that received both coaching and group experience improved in conversational skills and in their peer acceptance. For the other intervention groups, the outcome achieved was specific to the particular intervention.

Failure to incorporate classroom social network effects at Stage 4 of the Dodge et al. (1986) model may limit the generalization and maintenance of outcomes for intervention programs that focus on the social cognitions and behaviors of individual students. Furnham and Argyle (1981) identified generalization as “the Achilles heel of social skills training” (p. 131). Researchers typically have emphasized the need to train for generalization (e.g., Gresham & Elliott, 1993). Elliott and Busse (1991) suggested that generalization can be facilitated by including as many of the following elements in the program as possible:

- teach behaviors that are likely to be valued in everyday settings and so be naturally reinforced when they occur there;

- train across people and settings that the child encounters every day;
- fade training arrangements, such as special reinforcement, until they are very like those that occur naturally;
- reinforce applications of skills to new and appropriate situations; and
- include peers in training.

The importance of systematically considering each stage of the Dodge et al. (1986) model and targeting it when conducting an intervention has also been noted in studies in which students with low peer-acceptance ratings demonstrated changes in their behavior following social skills training—even though classmates might have been slow in granting them higher social status (Frederickson & Simms, 1990; Pellegrini & Urbain, 1985). For instance, Pellegrini and Urbain pointed out that well-established friendship networks and a prior history of negative contact with the target student may reduce the generalization of training effects from a social skills group to the classroom or the playground. In addition to social skills training with the target student, other approaches may need to be implemented to change the perceptions of, judgments by, and acceptance by classmates.

This article reports on a small-scale, preliminary evaluation of a recently developed approach to promoting children’s social inclusion and acceptance that centrally involves the classroom peer group. The Circle of Friends approach was developed to support the process of including (a) people with disabilities in local communities where they had previously lived in institutions and (b) students who experienced special educational needs in mainstream schools where they had previously been educated in separate special schools (Forest &

Lusthaus, 1989; Snow & Forest, 1987). This approach has also been adapted to support children experiencing emotional, behavioral, and social difficulties in an educational setting by enlisting the help of the other children in their classes and setting up in each class a special group or "circle" of friends (Newton, Taylor, & Wilson, 1996; Pearpoint & Forest, 1992; Taylor, 1996). The special group helps to set, monitor, and review weekly target goals in a meeting facilitated by an adult. It also provides support for facilitating the inclusion of the child who is experiencing problems and helps him or her achieve his or her target goals.

The Circle of Friends approach for assisting students who have emotional and behavioral difficulties was described by Taylor (1996, 1997) as follows. To *establish prerequisites*, the commitment of the school management is secured to provide the staff time needed (30 to 40 minutes per week for a staff member [usually the class teacher] to facilitate the small-group circle meeting). In addition, informed consent and support from the students and their parents are obtained. A *class discussion* then is held. This is usually facilitated by someone from outside the school who is familiar with the approach, such as an educational psychologist, and the class teacher is present. Ground rules for the discussion are established. The focus child usually is not present, so the reasons for discussing this child in his or her absence and with his or her consent are discussed with the class. The class is asked about the focus child's strengths before being asked to identify difficulties. The facilitator then talks with the class about friendships and the feelings and behaviors that may be engendered by a lack of friendship and support. Links with the focus child's behavior are drawn, and suggestions are generated for assisting the child and improving the situation. Finally, volunteers are sought to be part of a support group for the focus child. Six to eight students are selected to form the Circle of Friends, and the other students are thanked for their contribution and reminded that they also can continue to be involved in helping the focus child in the ways that have been discussed.

The *initial meeting of the Circle of Friends* generally takes place immediately after the class discussion and is led by the outside facilitator, with the class teacher contributing. The focus child joins the group, the class discussion is summarized for him or her, and he or she is centrally involved in identifying target goals to be worked on and strategies to be implemented by the child and the Circle of Friends in the coming week. *Weekly meetings of the Circle of Friends* are typically held over a period of 6 to 10 weeks. These are usually facilitated by the class teacher, with advice from the educational psychologist. The meetings are carefully managed to be a positive, supportive experience for all the children. The meeting begins with a warm-up game and a reminder of the ground rules: confidentiality, listening to each other, seeking adult help if worried. The group reviews the target goals and strategies identified the previous week and discusses what went well, what did not go so well, and what should be done next week. Successes are celebrated, problem-solving strategies are mod-

eled and applied, and action for the coming week is decided. Role-play may be used in practicing a particular behavior or trying out plans.

As shown, the Circle of Friends incorporates many elements recommended by Elliott and Busse (1991). Peers and other people whom the child encounters every day, such as teachers, are included in the training, which is focused on behaviors valued in everyday settings. Emphasis is placed on reinforcing as naturally as possible the application of skills to new and appropriate situations when they occur there. The approach therefore addresses aspects identified as important in the Dodge et al. (1986) model that are not addressed in traditional, person-focused social skills intervention programs. Some drawbacks may be associated with the approach, however. Much less time is devoted to—and less emphasis is placed on—the development of cognitive and behavioral skills. No attempt is made to systematically assess these; rather, the areas addressed are ones highlighted by events during the lifespan of the Circle intervention and raised during the weekly Circle meetings.

Systematic information regarding the impact of the Circle of Friends approach on different aspects of social competence is needed; however, few evaluations have been conducted to date. The few published evaluations have reported encouraging results using qualitative case-study methodologies (Newton, et al., 1996; Pearpoint & Forest, 1992; Taylor, 1996) or illuminative analysis of participant perspectives and impressions (Taylor & Burden, 2000; Whitaker, Barratt, Joy, Potter, & Thomas, 1998). This body of work has been useful in illustrating the approach, identifying themes, and developing hypotheses. As Whitaker et al. acknowledged, however, it is not possible from these reports to establish whether any changes can be reliably attributed to the Circle of Friends intervention. The research presented here builds on the recommendations of previous qualitative evaluation studies (Taylor & Burden, 2000). We report the results from an initial pair of small-scale evaluation studies designed to provide information regarding the impact of Circle of Friends on different aspects of social competence.

Method

Participants

Participants were 20 students (6 to 12 years of age) in one English county who had been referred to the program by educational psychologists. The psychologists had assessed these students as having emotional and behavioral difficulties at Stage 3 of the UK Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of students who have special educational needs. Such difficulties include "withdrawn, depressive, or suicidal attitudes; obsessional preoccupation with eating habits; school phobia; substance misuse; disruptive, anti-social, and uncooperative behaviour; and frustration, anger, and threat of or

actual violence” (Department of Education, 1994, paragraph 3.66). Of the participants, 20% had exhibited withdrawn behavior and 80% had exhibited disruptive, antisocial, and uncooperative behavior, with 45% of the latter group also having exhibited angry, threatening, or violent behavior. In each case, peer-relationship problems had been identified as a significant aspect of the student’s profile of emotional and behavioral difficulties. At Stage 3, students are entitled to additional special services from the local education authority in whose district their school is located. Of the participants, 45% had been allocated support assistant time in their mainstream class; 20% received weekly input from a district behavior support team teacher, which consisted of class teacher consultation and student counseling; and 35% attended a district educational therapy unit for 1 day per week. In addition, 35% from across all three categories of education district provision were receiving child and family psychiatric services because of behavior problems at home.

Initially, 22 students had been referred to the program. Parental and school consent for participation was obtained for 20 of these 22 children. The 20 participants consisted of 19 boys and 1 girl. Each participant was in a different classroom: 2 were in a Grade 1 classroom, 5 in Grade 2, 4 in Grade 3, 6 in Grade 4, and 3 in Grade 5. The classes were drawn from 15 different regular schools, one school having four involved classes and two schools each having two involved classes. Although all the participants had been referred as having primary emotional and behavioral difficulties, 30% had additional significant learning difficulties (defined by literacy or numeracy scores more than 1 standard deviation below the mean for their age group). The classroom peers who participated in each Circle of Friends were selected by the class teacher from children who volunteered and had parental consent. The number of other children involved in each of the 19 circles ranged from 4 to 8 ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 1.22$). The numbers of boys and girls involved each ranged from 2 to 5 (Boys: $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.02$; Girls: $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.85$).

Procedure

Within each year cohort, participants were randomly assigned to receive the Circle of Friends intervention in Phase 1 or Phase 2. During Phase 1, Circles of Friends were set up for 10 students (Group 1), with the remaining 10 students (Group 2) serving as a wait-list comparison group during Phase 1 who received the intervention during Phase 2. At the start of the spring term, prior to Intervention Phase 1, baseline assessments were administered to all participants in whole-class groups by four graduate students enrolled in a master’s professional training course in educational psychology. In Intervention Phase 1, which took place during the spring term, a graduate student in educational psychology ran a Circle of Friends for each of the Group 1 students over a 6-week period. These graduate students conducted the initial class discussion with the teacher present and then facilitated

the six weekly meetings of the Circle of Friends. The graduate students provided the teacher with a proforma record of the weekly meeting (the Circle Meeting Record Sheet) so the teacher knew the target goals and the strategies identified for the week. The wait-list group did not receive the Circle of Friends intervention; however, staff members at the schools were asked to spend 20 to 30 minutes per week with each Group 2 focus child in a small group while reading a story with a friendship theme. This was intended to provide a control for the additional adult attention and small-group experience involved in the Circle of Friends intervention. The measures were then readministered at the end of the spring term, and Phase 1 outcomes across the program and for the comparison groups were compared. The participation of the Group 1 students, who had a Circle of Friends intervention in Phase 1, ceased at this point.

In Phase 2, during the summer term, 9 of the 10 children from the wait-list comparison group received the Circle of Friends program. The 10th student had moved to a school in another area and was lost to the project. The initial class discussion was run by a local educational authority educational psychologist, with the class teacher present. The six weekly meetings of the Circle of Friends were run by a staff member from the involved school, with advice from the educational psychologist. In most cases, the staff member was the class teacher. In one school, a specialist teacher ran the weekly Circle meetings; in two schools, this was done by a specialist support assistant. Comparison of the Circle Meeting Record Sheets completed by the educational psychologist in Phase 2 with those completed by the graduate students in Phase 1 indicated that the majority of target goals, although individualized, were in areas common to many students across both groups. Examples included dealing with teasing and bullying, eliminating bullying of others, managing feelings and recognizing others’ feelings, making new friends, listening to others, sharing and taking turns, playing games fairly, learning assertiveness skills, relating to adults, using language appropriately, and improving self-organization or work output. The measures were then readministered toward the end of the summer term to those students who had participated in the program in Phase 2. Phase 1 thus utilized a between-groups pre-post design; Phase 2 utilized a within-subjects design.

Measures

The *Sociometric Rating Scale* (Asher & Dodge, 1986) provides information about Stage 4 of the Dodge et al. (1986) model: It ascertains other children’s perceptions of and judgments regarding the focus child. Respondents are asked to circle the number from 1 to 5 that best describes how much they like to “play with” every other child in the class. Schematic faces drawn above the numbers, ranging from a frown above the number 1 to a broad smile above the number 5, are used to help communicate the meaning of each number. The average play rating given by classmates provides a measure of so-

cial acceptance/social inclusion in play, which has been reported to have a test-retest reliability of 0.82 over 2 months with primary school students (Asher & Dodge, 1986) and a test-retest reliability of 0.69 over 5 months (Oden & Asher, 1977). In addition, following Asher and Dodge, we computed a lowest play rating score as a measure of social rejection: It indicated the proportion of classmates who gave a child a 1-point rating (the lowest possible play rating).

The *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (Harter, 1985) assesses children's self-perceptions and provides information about Stage 2 of the Dodge et al. (1986) model. It contains 36 items in five domains of competence: *scholastic competence* (assessing how well the children believe they are performing at school and how quickly they can complete their work), *social acceptance* (assessing how popular the children feel they are and if they believe they have a lot of friends), *athletic competence* (assessing the children's perception of their athletic ability), *physical appearance* (assessing how attractive the children feel they are), and *behavioral conduct* (assessing how well the children feel they behave and if they like the way they behave). In addition, a global self-worth scale assesses the extent to which the children like themselves as people. An average score for each subscale is calculated. Satisfactory alpha reliability coefficients (.71 to .82) have been reported (Harter, 1985).

The *Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior* (Harter, 1985) parallels the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* and provides information about Stage 3 of the Dodge et al. (1986) model. There are three items in each of the five specific domains: scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. Harter reported that only three items per scale are needed "to obtain highly reliable judgments" (p. 12). The teacher, or other adult, is asked to rate the child's actual behavior on each item, and the mean teacher rating score for each domain is calculated.

The short form of *My Class Inventory* (MCI-SF) measures elementary-age students' and teachers' perceptions of their classroom learning environment (Fraser, 1982; Fraser & Fisher, 1986). It provides information about Stage 1 of the Dodge et al. (1986) model. The MCI-SF is composed of five scales, each containing five items. The meanings of the scales are defined as follows: *Cohesiveness* (the extent students know, help, and are friendly toward each other), *Friction* (the extent of tension and quarrelling among students), *Difficulty* (the extent to which students have difficulty with the work of the class), *Satisfaction* (the extent to which students like their class), and *Competition* (the extent to which the students perceive an atmosphere of competition in a classroom). Fraser and O'Brien (1985) reported evidence on the internal consistency and discriminant validity of each MCI-SF scale, with alpha reliabilities as follows: Cohesiveness = 0.81, Friction = 0.78, Difficulty = 0.58, Satisfaction = 0.68, and Competitiveness = 0.70. Scores on the MCI-SF were analyzed (a) by class to provide

a measure (mean score) on each scale of each classroom of the classroom learning environment as perceived by the students and (b) by individual student to provide a measure of his or her perceptions of the classroom environment.

Results

Phase 1: Pre-Post Between-Group Analyses

Preliminary analysis indicated that the intervention group and the wait-list comparison group in Phase 1 of the study were well matched on age: intervention group— $M = 105.5$ months, $SD = 16.2$; comparison group— $M = 105.1$ months, $SD = 17.6$; $t(18) = 0.05$, *ns*.

Differences between the groups were analyzed using ANCOVAs, with postintervention scores as the dependent variable and preintervention scores as the covariate in each analysis. Table 1 shows the average sociometric ratings assigned to each group by all the classmates; by members of the child's Circle of Friends; and by other children in the class, excluding members of the Circle of Friends. Table 1 also shows the proportion of students in each class who gave the lowest possible play rating (1) to the intervention or comparison group students at each time of assessment. Data on ratings from classmates who did and did not belong to the Circle of Friends were missing for one comparison group student due to the absence of identifying data on the questionnaires completed in this class at pretest. Significant posttreatment performance on sociometric "play with" ratings given by classmates was found for the intervention group compared to the wait-list comparison group. When the ratings given by children in the Circle of Friends were disaggregated from the ratings of the children who were not in the Circle, a statistically significant effect was apparent only for the Circle of Friends subgroup.

Table 2 shows the results of the analyses of scale scores on the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* and the *Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior*. Student self-perceptions showed no significant effects. Due to the intervention schedule, only one further opportunity was available per student or teacher to collect any data missing through absence (in the case of students) and absence or failure to return questionnaires (in the case of the teachers). On the *Self-Perception Profile*, posttest data were unavailable for two intervention students and one comparison student. On the *Teacher's Rating Scale*, posttest data were unavailable for two intervention students and one comparison student. The only analysis where significant results were obtained was that conducted on students' perception of their scholastic competence, where the self-perception scores of the comparison group became more negative over time than did those of the intervention group. No effects were apparent on teachers' ratings of student behavior.

TABLE 1. Sociometric Ratings Received by Intervention and Comparison Group Students in Phase 1

Sociometric measure	Intervention group				Comparison group				ANCOVA	Effect size η^2
	Preintervention		Postintervention		Preintervention		Postintervention			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Whole class's rating	2.44	0.66	3.00	0.50	2.66	0.58	2.50	0.62	$F(1, 17) = 9.03$ $p < .01$	.35
Circle of Friends' rating	2.65	0.75	3.76	0.84	3.35	1.01	2.99	0.63	$F(1, 16) = 7.23$ $p < .02$	.31
Other class members' rating	2.35	0.71	2.75	0.54	2.59	0.46	2.55	0.47	$F(1, 16) = 1.78$ $p = .20$	.10
Proportion of classmates giving "1" rating ^a	0.41	0.23	0.28	0.11	0.38	0.18	0.40	0.22	$F(1, 17) = 3.70$ $p < .07$	.18

^a1 = lowest possible play rating.

TABLE 2. Scores on the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* and the *Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior* for the Intervention and Comparison Group Students in Phase 1

Scale/ subscale	Intervention group				Comparison group				ANCOVA	Effect size η ²
	Preintervention		Postintervention		Preintervention		Postintervention			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Self-Perception Profile for Children</i>										
Scholastic Competence	2.52	0.70	2.22	0.14	2.26	0.64	1.76	0.54	<i>F</i> (1, 14) = 5.48 <i>p</i> = .025	.28
Social Acceptance	2.03	0.83	1.79	0.58	2.17	0.76	1.94	0.69	<i>F</i> (1, 14) = 0.31 <i>p</i> = .57	.02
Athletic Competence	2.79	0.83	2.79	0.91	2.89	0.71	2.39	0.94	<i>F</i> (1, 14) = 0.73 <i>p</i> = .41	.05
Physical Appearance	2.72	1.10	2.83	1.49	2.34	1.13	2.38	0.91	<i>F</i> (1, 14) = 0.38 <i>p</i> = .55	.03
Behavioral Conduct	2.25	0.75	1.89	0.51	2.19	0.87	1.67	0.58	<i>F</i> (1, 14) = 0.99 <i>p</i> = .34	.07
Global Self-Worth	2.63	0.65	2.30	0.39	2.25	0.66	1.65	0.03	<i>F</i> (1, 14) = 4.38 <i>p</i> = .06	.24
<i>Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior</i>										
Scholastic Competence	2.52	0.92	2.79	0.66	2.13	0.73	2.08	0.39	<i>F</i> (1, 13) = 1.77 <i>p</i> = .21	.12
Social Acceptance	1.53	0.75	1.65	0.77	1.52	0.54	1.80	0.57	<i>F</i> (1, 13) = 0.27 <i>p</i> = .61	.02
Athletic Competence	1.96	0.89	2.04	1.01	1.82	0.56	2.60	0.59	<i>F</i> (1, 13) = 0.86 <i>p</i> = .37	.06
Physical Appearance	3.03	1.23	2.86	1.40	3.12	0.70	2.84	0.72	<i>F</i> (1, 13) = 0.84 <i>p</i> = .38	.06
Behavioral Conduct	1.73	0.84	1.66	0.77	1.84	0.91	1.84	0.74	<i>F</i> (1, 13) = 0.16 <i>p</i> = .70	.01

Note. *Self-Perception Profile* (Harter, 1985); *Teacher's Rating Scale* (Harter, 1985).

Table 3 reports results for each of the scales from the Short Form of the *My Class Inventory*. The first part of the table reports the mean scores for the intervention and comparison groups, using data from all the students in a class. The second part reports the mean scores for the intervention and comparison groups, using data from the students with emotional and behavioral difficulties only. This thus represents these students' individual perspectives on the classroom learning environment. Pretest data for two students from the intervention group and posttest data for two students from the comparison group were not available. No effects of the intervention were apparent on any scale for either measure.

Phase 2: Within-Group Analyses

Repeated measures ANOVAS were used to assess changes occurring during the intervention period for the nine participating students with behavioral problems in comparison to those occurring for the students on the waiting list for the intervention. Table 4 shows the average sociometric ratings received by each participant at all three times of testing from all classmates; from members of the child's Circle of Friends; and from other children in the class, excluding members of the Circle of Friends. Significant changes over time were observed for the ratings given by the whole class and for those given by classmates who were not in the Circle of Friends. Planned comparisons between scores at the beginning and end of each phase of the study indicated that scores on these measures increased significantly during the intervention phase: whole-class— $t(8) = 3.23, p = .012, \eta^2 = .57$; non-Circle class members— $t(8) = 3.66, p = .006, \eta^2 = .63$, but not during the initial waiting list period: whole-class— $t(8) = 1.03, p = .33, \eta^2 = .12$; non-Circle class members— $t(8) = 0.26, p = .80, \eta^2 = .01$. A significant change over time was also apparent in the proportion of classmates giving the lowest possible play rating to the student experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties, due to a decrease over the intervention phase: $t(8) = 4.54, p = .002, \eta^2 = .72$ but not during the waiting list phase: $t(8) = -.14, p = .89, \eta^2 = .002$.

Table 5 shows the results of the analyses of scale scores on the *Self-Perception Profile* and the *Teacher's Rating Scale*. For one variable, the teacher's rating of Athletic Competence, a significant result was obtained for the Mauchly sphericity test, indicating that homogeneity of covariance could not be assumed. In this case, an adjustment using the Greenhouse-Geisser epsilon was made. Student self-perceptions showed significant changes over time only on the Global Self-Worth scale. Planned comparisons between scores at the beginning and end of each phase of the study indicated that Global Self-Worth scores decreased significantly during the waiting list phase: $t(7) = -3.34, p = .012, \eta^2 = .61$, and then increased significantly during the intervention phase: $t(7) = 2.81, p = .03, \eta^2 = .53$. On the *Teacher's Rating Scale*, significant changes over time were apparent only on the Social Acceptance scale,

where ratings increased over the intervention phase: $t(7) = 3.53, p = .01, \eta^2 = .64$, but not over the wait-list phase: $t(7) = 1.25, p = -.25, \eta^2 = .18$.

Table 6 reports the scores on the *My Class Inventory* that were obtained at each time of assessment, collated across all the students in the class. It also reports the scores obtained from the individual students with emotional and behavioral difficulties for whom intervention was provided in Phase 2. A significant result was obtained for the Mauchly sphericity test on the measure of the individual student's satisfaction with his or her class, so an adjustment using the Greenhouse-Geisser epsilon was made in evaluating the significance of F in this case. The students in the involved classes showed significant changes in their perceptions of the difficulty of work in their class and the extent to which each student competes with the other students. Planned comparisons between scores at the beginning and end of each phase of the study indicated that scores on these measures did not change during the intervention phase: Competitiveness— $t(8) = 0.92, p = .39, \eta^2 = .1$; Difficulty— $t(8) = 0.62, p = .56, \eta^2 = .05$, but they showed significant decreases during the initial waiting list period: Competitiveness— $t(8) = 4.22, p = .003, \eta^2 = .69$; Difficulty— $t(8) = 3.01, p = .017, \eta^2 = .53$. No changes on these measures were apparent over time in any aspect of the perceptions of his or her class held by the individual students with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Discussion

Results from both intervention phases indicate that the Circle of Friends intervention had a positive impact on the social acceptance of the focus children in their classroom peer groups. The approach did not have an impact, however, on the focus children's perceptions of their social acceptance or behavioral conduct, on teacher ratings of behavioral conduct, or on the general ethos of the classroom learning environment. Although insufficient sensitivity of the assessment measures must be considered as an alternative explanation for the absence of significant findings in those areas, the results offer further support for the specificity of social intervention outcomes. The Circle of Friends intervention appears to be a useful means of changing other children's perceptions and judgments about a focus child. Where needs are identified in relation to other aspects of social competence, this intervention needs to be supplemented.

The findings highlight a number of issues for further consideration and research. The impact of the Phase 1 intervention on social acceptance appeared to be more narrowly focused on the students in the Circles of Friends, whereas the Phase 2 intervention appeared to have a more general impact on other students in the class. It is difficult to draw fine-grained comparisons between the results of the two intervention phases due to differences in study design: The possible effects of fa-

TABLE 3. Scores on the *My Class Inventory* (Short Form) for Whole Class and Focus Students in Phase 1

My Class Inventory subscale	Intervention group				Comparison group				ANCOVA	Effect size η ²
	Preintervention		Postintervention		Preintervention		Postintervention			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Collated perceptions of all students in the class										
Cohesion	10.46	1.72	9.22	2.35	10.42	1.19	9.72	1.03	$F(1, 17) = 0.13$ $p = .73$	.01
Competitiveness	11.60	1.11	11.02	1.15	11.43	0.93	10.30	1.08	$F(1, 17) = 2.47$ $p = .14$	.13
Difficulty	7.30	0.94	6.36	2.48	7.62	0.89	6.98	0.81	$F(1, 17) = 0.38$ $p = .55$	.02
Friction	9.77	1.34	9.35	1.66	9.79	1.22	9.44	1.39	$F(1, 17) = 0.04$ $p = .85$	.002
Satisfaction	12.25	0.86	12.41	1.04	11.94	0.99	12.09	1.14	$F(1, 17) = 0.00$ $p = .97$	.00
Perceptions of focus students										
Cohesion	8.75	3.73	9.80	3.99	9.70	2.75	9.13	3.87	$F(1, 13) = 1.19$ $p = .30$	.08
Competitiveness	13.25	1.49	10.60	3.98	12.90	2.51	12.00	3.21	$F(1, 13) = 0.64$ $p = .44$	.05
Difficulty	8.88	2.53	7.00	2.45	10.50	2.55	9.50	2.98	$F(1, 13) = 1.44$ $p = .25$	.10
Friction	10.88	3.00	10.30	3.71	11.10	1.91	10.75	2.71	$F(1, 13) = 0.01$ $p = .92$	.001
Satisfaction	11.75	2.60	10.70	3.30	10.60	2.84	10.13	3.00	$F(1, 13) = 0.04$ $p = .84$	.003

Note. *My Class Inventory–Short Form* (Fraser, 1982; Fraser & Fisher, 1986).

TABLE 4. Sociometric Ratings Received at the Three Assessment Times by Group 2 Students Who Received the Intervention Between Times 2 and 3

Sociometric measure	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3		ANOVA	Effect size η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Whole class's rating	2.78	0.58	2.63	0.47	3.16	0.53	$F(2, 16) = 7.67$ $p < .01$	.49
Circle of Friends' rating	3.35	1.01	2.99	0.63	3.63	0.66	$F(2, 16) = 2.96$ $p = .08$	.27
Other class members' rating	2.59	0.46	2.55	0.47	3.03	0.51	$F(2, 16) = 7.07$ $p < .01$	.47
Proportion of classmates giving "1" rating ^a	0.34	0.15	0.35	0.16	0.19	0.10	$F(2, 16) = 13.41$ $p < .001$	.63

^a1 = lowest possible play rating.

cilitation of the weekly Circle meetings by an outsider, rather than the class teacher, should be considered. Outsider facilitation of the weekly Circle meetings in Phase 1 was seen as a positive aspect of the program by the schools involved and one that greatly eased the time and resource commitments required for study participation. The associated possibility that the class teacher might become unhelpfully detached from the process was anticipated, and the facilitator completed a record sheet for the class teacher following each Circle meeting. This provided a summary review of the previous week's target goals and notes on what had and had not gone well. Target goals for the following week and the strategies Circle members had agreed to use were also identified so that the class teacher could support them during the week and reinforce appropriate behavior by the Circle members and other classmates. Reports from both the facilitators and the class teachers suggest that variable use was made of these record sheets, and it must be considered that they may in any case have been insufficient to keep the class teacher adequately informed and involved.

During Phase 2, a number of teachers reported the adoption of feedback sessions from the Circle to the class as a whole and involvement of the class in helping in particular ways. In some cases, the initiation of this strategy (recommended by Taylor, 1997) followed instances where other members of the class expressed jealousy toward Circle members. In this study, as in previous accounts of the Circle of Friends approach, almost all members of the class responded to the appeal at the end of the whole-class discussion for volunteers to participate in the Circle. Taylor (1997) noted that individuals who are not selected may feel disappointed. It may be preferable to modify the approach to formally include feedback sessions from the Circle to the whole class. The possibility of holding whole-class review meetings from which particular students take on specific tasks, rather than selecting a small group to meet weekly, might also be considered. A whole-class review could prove daunting for the focus student, however, and it may not be as easy as in a small group for staff members to monitor and manage the intervention to move toward positive outcomes for all involved. For the Circle members, it must be made clear that they are helping the focus students, supporting them in agreed upon ways to help them establish more socially acceptable behaviors, but are not responsible for them and should discuss any worries with an adult. There is a concern that peers may take on more responsibility than is appropriate, and this should be monitored by staff members.

For the focus student, the potential for negative labeling should be carefully considered alongside the potential benefits of the Circle of Friends. Peer-relationship difficulties was a selection criterion for students in this study, and in the pre-intervention assessment they received on average the lowest possible peer rating from 40% of classmates. These students were already negatively labeled and rejected by their peers, so the potential benefits of the Circle of Friends in assisting them and their classmates to learn more constructive ways of relating to each other was judged to outweigh the possible risks.

By contrast, concerns about the risks of negative effects led Shotton (1998) to modify the approach when working with a socially isolated Grade 6 girl who was neglected, rather than rejected, by the peer group. In this intervention, the initial class discussion about friendships was not focused on any individual, and the invitation was to join a small lunchtime group where students would have a chance to get to know one another better and become firm friends.

In Phase 1, no impact of the intervention was apparent on teacher ratings of any aspect of student behavior. In Phase 2, however, a significant increase was recorded on teacher ratings of social acceptance. As the same teachers were involved in implementing the intervention, the possibility must be considered that they consciously or unconsciously gave inflated postintervention ratings in the absence of actual behavior change. Against this is the observation from the Circle Meeting Record Sheets that much time was also spent focusing on target goals that would fall within the Behavioral Conduct scale, yet teacher ratings only improved significantly on Social Acceptance. In addition, the improved teacher ratings of social acceptance are supported by the significant changes apparent in direct measures of this variable.

On the Harter (1985) self-perception measure, there was no evidence of program impact on either perceived social competence or perceived behavioral conduct. On self-report measures of this kind, the possibility of generalized "social desirability" responding, where the participants say what they think researchers want to hear, must always be considered. Perceived scholastic competence decreased significantly more for the wait-list comparison group than for the program group in Phase 1, however. This may reflect peer support from Circle members in achieving target goals focused on maintaining concentration and completing work assignments. Because many more target goals were set in the social and behavioral domains, this finding offers little evidence of the impact of the intervention on self-perceptions in Phase 1. In Phase 2, focus students' perceptions of their global self-worth increased significantly, providing some evidence of a non-specific positive effect. This may be attributable to the regular attention received from the class teacher, as opposed to a graduate student (Phase 1 intervention group) or a learning support assistant (Phase 1 comparison group: small group reading a story with a friendship theme). The extent to which attention can be said to be adequately controlled for when it is provided by staff members with different qualifications, roles, and reward values to the children is questionable and represents one of the limitations of this study.

A number of other limitations must also be acknowledged. The small size of the groups limited the power of the statistical procedures employed and the generalizability of the findings. The findings should therefore be treated tentatively, and replication with a larger sample would be useful. Other limitations relate to the variability in age and marked imbalance in the gender of the sample. It cannot be assumed that these findings would apply at all grade levels across the 6- to

TABLE 5. Scores on the *Self-Perception Profile* and the *Teacher's Rating Scale* at the Three Assessment Times by Group 2 Students

Subscale	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3		ANOVA	Effect size η ²
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Self-Perception Profile</i>								
Scholastic Competence	2.22	0.67	1.76	0.54	2.22	0.86	$F(2, 14) = 2.51$ $p = .12$	.26
Social Acceptance	2.17	0.81	1.94	0.73	2.53	0.91	$F(2, 14) = 1.77$ $p = .21$	.20
Athletic Competence	2.90	0.76	2.19	0.77	2.53	0.87	$F(2, 14) = 1.65$ $p = .23$	.19
Physical Appearance	2.16	1.03	2.24	0.87	2.54	1.01	$F(2, 14) = 0.32$ $p = .74$	.04
Behavioral Conduct	2.19	0.92	1.69	0.62	2.41	0.89	$F(2, 14) = 2.06$ $p = .17$	.23
Global Self-Worth	2.22	0.70	1.52	0.52	2.47	0.84	$F(2, 14) = 5.10$ $p < .05$	.42
<i>Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior</i>								
Scholastic Competence	2.11	0.77	1.99	0.32	1.95	0.63	$F(2, 12) = 0.63$ $p = .55$	.10
Social Acceptance	1.58	0.52	1.90	0.52	2.39	0.52	$F(2, 14) = 6.52$ $p < .01$	.48
Athletic Competence	1.80	0.59	2.07	0.62	2.41	0.82	$F(2, 14) = 3.47$ $p = .10$	.33
Physical Appearance	3.02	0.66	2.95	0.69	2.96	0.70	$F(2, 14) = 0.04$ $p = .96$	.01
Behavioral Conduct	1.93	0.91	1.95	0.71	2.18	0.98	$F(2, 14) = 0.72$ $p = .51$	.09

Note. *Self-Perception Profile* (Harter, 1985); *Teacher's Rating Scale* (Harter, 1985).

12-year age range. Only 1 of the 22 children referred to the project was a girl. This does not necessarily indicate a biased sample of the population under study in that a boy-to-girl ratio of 14 to 1 has been reported in exclusions from primary schools in the United Kingdom (Castles & Parsons, 1997). It does mean that the results cannot be applied to girls, particularly in view of the established differences between the self-selected peer groups of boys and girls in middle childhood on dimensions such as intensiveness, exclusiveness, stability, reciprocity, and hierarchical organization (Daniels-Beirness, 1989). Investigation of possible age and gender effects are important areas for future research.

Limitations in the implementation of the intervention must also be acknowledged. Although the 9 Circles in Phase 2 were run by members of the school staff, as they would be in practice, in Phase 1 all 10 Circles were run by one of four graduate students. This had the advantage of promoting consistency of approach, but it further reduced the number of treatment implementers involved in the study and the confidence with which the results can be generalized. The duration of the intervention period over which change was evaluated was 6 weeks

in each case. This follows the advice in Taylor (1997) as to the period after which the frequency of group meetings can be reduced, although it is recommended that a further three meetings be scheduled fortnightly. It may be, however, that changes in other aspects of social competence would have occurred if the intervention had been longer. Longer-term follow-up would also be desirable for investigating the maintenance of the gains that were observed.

Conclusions

Results from both phases of this study provide support for the view that the Circle of Friends intervention enjoys some success in promoting the acceptance of the focus student by the classroom peer group. For the Circles led by a graduate student in educational psychology, changes in acceptance overall appeared largely due to changes in social acceptance by Circle members. When the Circle was led by a member of the school staff, other class members played a more important role, and the effect size data indicated strong associations be-

TABLE 6. Scores on the *My Class Inventory* (Short Form) at the Three Assessment Times for Whole Class and for Group 2 Focus Students

My Class Inventory subscale	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3		ANOVA	Effect size η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Collated perceptions of all students in the class								
Cohesion	10.39	1.26	9.89	0.94	10.46	1.43	$F(2, 16) = 1.10$ $p = .36$	.12
Competitiveness	11.28	0.87	10.23	1.12	10.51	0.98	$F(2, 16) = 6.34$ $p < .01$	.44
Difficulty	7.61	0.95	7.06	0.82	6.98	0.85	$F(2, 16) = 6.75$ $p < .01$	.46
Friction	9.77	1.29	9.46	1.47	9.42	1.63	$F(2, 16) = 0.51$ $p = .61$	.06
Satisfaction	11.92	1.04	12.03	1.19	11.65	1.34	$F(2, 16) = 0.87$ $p = .39$	.01
Perceptions of focus students								
Cohesion	9.56	2.88	9.71	3.77	10.50	4.50	$F(2, 12) = 2.00$ $p = .18$	.25
Competitiveness	12.67	2.55	11.86	3.44	10.50	2.14	$F(2, 12) = 1.58$ $p = .25$	.21
Difficulty	11.11	1.76	10.14	2.54	10.00	2.39	$F(2, 12) = 0.72$ $p = .51$	.11
Friction	11.33	1.87	11.29	2.43	9.63	2.56	$F(2, 12) = 2.19$ $p = .16$	.27
Satisfaction	10.33	2.87	9.43	2.44	11.63	2.97	$F(2, 12) = 2.71$ $p = .11$	.31

Note. *My Class Inventory*—Short Form (Fraser, 1982; Fraser & Fisher, 1986).

tween the implementation of the intervention and increases in acceptance, accompanied by decreases in rejection. This study demonstrates that the classroom social network can be readily utilized by this means and that the approach represents a potentially valuable addition to the available range of social interventions. Newton and Wilson (1999) emphasized the different starting point adopted in this approach from that of a social skills deficit approach: "Too often acceptance of individual students is conditional on their behavior changing before they are deemed to belong. When attempting to include by building a Circle, what changes first is the behavior of those around the focus person—the person who is at the centre of the Circle" (p. 13).

Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, and Mastin (1998) expressed concerns, however, about "techniques such as Circles of Friends" in this regard, arguing that "a clear lack of reciprocity has been one of the major problems in such relationships, with the child with disabilities consistently being the one helped or supported, often with little attention given to the general social context of the classroom" (p. 105). This view would appear to be supported by the conclusions of Whitacker et al. (1998), resulting from their use of the approach to support seven students with autism spectrum disor-

ders. They found that throughout the intervention the focus children remained recipients of support rather than equal participants with the Circle members.

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect this approach to achieve these broader objectives relating to the general social context of the classroom and equality of participation. To better define what can be expected, a clearer understanding is required of the mechanisms through which improvements in peer group acceptance are thought to be achieved. Whitacker et al. (1998) suggested that "recognition of positive attributes, greater understanding of difficulties and a much reduced tendency to blame the focus child" (p. 64) may play a part. The third of these elements would appear to be consistent with the attributional analysis of Graham (1997), which linked perceived responsibility for behavior with affect and acceptance or rejection.

It thus does not appear that the Circle of Friends intervention operates through helping the focus child learn new social skills that then lead to greater peer group acceptance. In support of this, neither the teachers nor the students in either intervention phase believed the focus child's behavior had changed. Nonetheless, in Phase 2, teachers did detect positive changes in the child's social acceptance. Effect size data indicated a moderate impact on self-worth in Phase 1, whereas a

strong and statistically significant effect was found in Phase 2. Neither the focus students nor their classmates perceived changes in the classroom ethos in either phase. These tentative results are consistent with a focused short-term impact on other children's attitudes at Stage 4 of the Dodge et al. (1986) model. It is not clear whether this would lead to more positive experiences with peers and more frequent reinforcement of acceptable social behavior that might have more extensive effects in these areas in the longer term. Alternatively, changes in the peer group in the longer term may lead to a diminution of the effects on social acceptance. Examination of change mechanisms and longer-term impact are areas for future research that will help to define the strengths and limitations of the Circle of Friends in supporting the social inclusion of children experiencing a range of needs.

AUTHORS' NOTE

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of Michael Annan, Julia Katherine, Rej Metha, and Kathryn Weston, who as educational psychologists in training at University College London conducted the intervention in Phase 1 and collected assessment data.

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