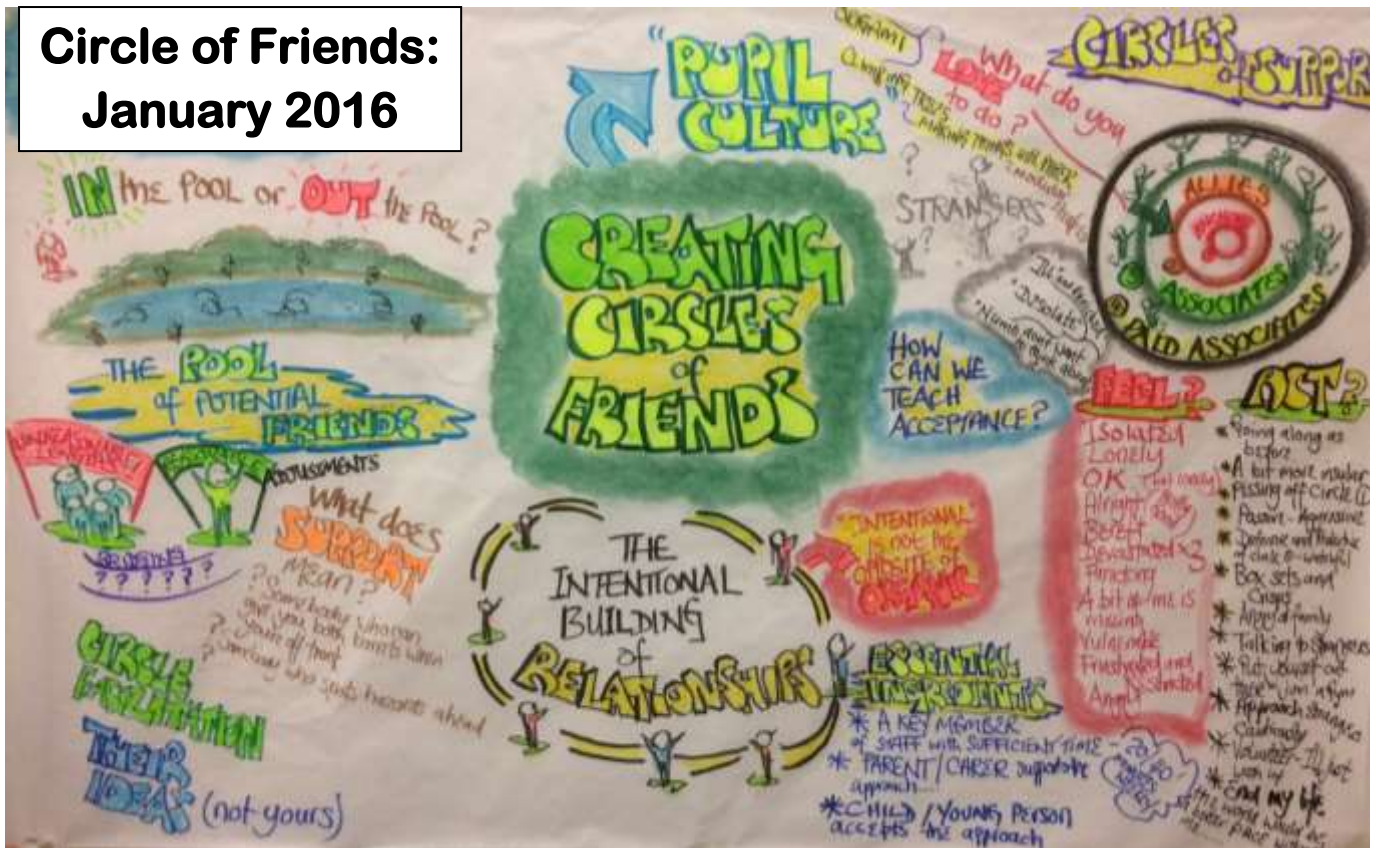


Circle of Friends: January 2016



About Circle of Friends

Circle of Friends is a technique that can be used to increase the inclusion of a child or young person (known as the focus child). The approach works particularly well in mainstream primary or secondary schools. Circle of Friends is about building a peer network to support a challenging or vulnerable child / young person who may be experiencing difficulties in forming friendships perhaps due to a disability, behavioural, social or emotional development need. View supporting training film clip 'Why Create a Circle of Friends' [here](#).

Circle of Friends can be effectively used to

- Prevent pupil isolation and victimisation
- Reduce challenging behaviour - avoiding the need to permanently exclude
- Develop self-awareness and increase insight of how others view the world
- Support a new pupil or a child / young person returning to school
- Build a support network around a person

Circle of Friends is all about relationships and recognising the power of the peer group.

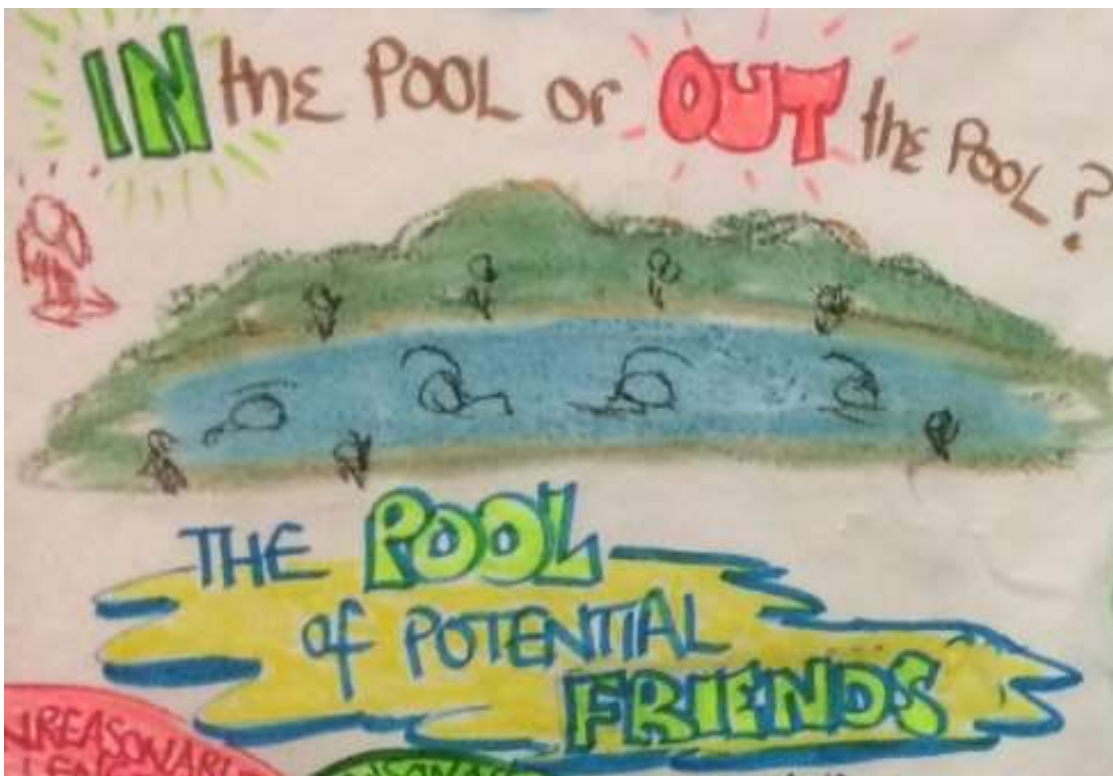
Although Circle of Friends does not create friendships (this is only something individuals can do) it invites the child or young person's peers to create a 'friendship circle' to help them feel more included.

Circle of Friends can also bring great benefits to all those involved as each member learns to identify and express feelings, develop a greater understanding of other people's views, listen and problem solve. The approach can also enable staff to feel more supported and develop self-esteem as they see their work bringing success. "Circle of Friends" compliments existing work that may already be happening – several schools have embedded it within their PSHE curriculum and are recognising those involved as "inclusion ambassadors".

An example of its use can be found [here](#). Further information on Circle of Friends can be found on the Inclusive Solutions website [here](#).

Making 'Circle of Friends' happen

1. **Gain support from your school.** A member of staff will need to have some agreed time to develop the 'Circle of Friends' approach for facilitating the sessions and for follow-up support with the focus child and group members. The role of the staff member is to facilitate the session and encourage mutual support, trust and honesty. A 'dream-staff-team' would be a Teacher /SENCo and Teaching Assistant.
2. **Gain consent from Parents:** The parent carer of the focus child should be 'open-to-change' as they may need to welcome new friends into their home and encourage friendships. It can be useful for a school to adopt this as a common school approach as part of their PSHE curriculum so all parents receive information about the work.
3. **Gain agreement of the Focus Child:** This is most easily gained when the person involved in this work is someone the child trusts. If the child decides that they do not want their own circle they still may want to become part of someone else's, which in itself will offer them benefits.
4. **Recruit 6 – 8 volunteers to form 'Circle of Friends':** Define the situation with the whole class (without the focus child) and gain support to improve things for the focus child. [See suggested Recruitment Session format.](#)
5. **Update Focus Child:** Share feedback from the volunteer recruitment exercise with focus child.
6. **Hold first 'Circle of Friends' session.** [See suggested Circle Session format.](#)



Suggested Format for recruitment of 'Circle of Friends' Volunteers

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

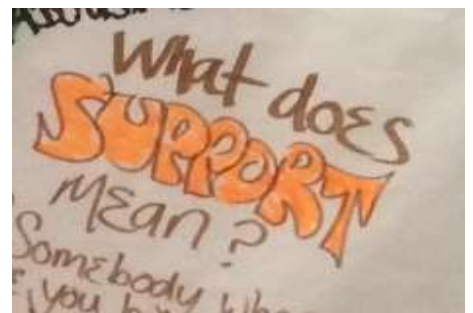
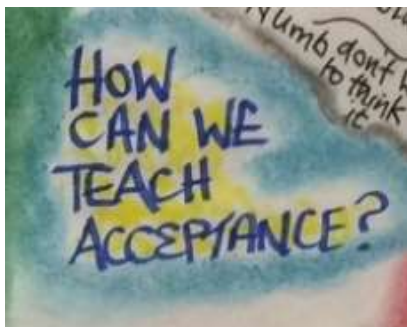
The discussion is led by an adult facilitator – it often helps if this is someone the class is less familiar with. The class teacher and / or whoever will be maintaining this work should also be present.

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.

Typical phrases a facilitator might say when recruiting volunteers for 'Circle of Friends'

- This is going to be a confidential session. Who knows what confidential means?
- We are here to help [focus child]. [Focus child] know we are meeting today. We might not know [focus child] well, but we want to know more what it's like for [focus child] in school.
- When are you happy for [focus child]? When does it work well for [focus child]?
- What is not working so well for [focus child]? When is it difficult?
- Think of a time you felt different to others. How did it feel for you? How did you act?
- What could we do to not make [focus child] feel so different / help them when things are difficult?
- Who would be good to be in a 'Circle of Friends' for [focus child]? Why?
- Who would like to volunteer to form the support circle for [focus child]?



Suggested Format for the first 'Circle of Friends' Session

A session typically lasts 30 – 40 mins. The session is led by an adult facilitator. View an example of the first 'Circle of Friends meeting [here](#).

- **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 – see example.
- **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.



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

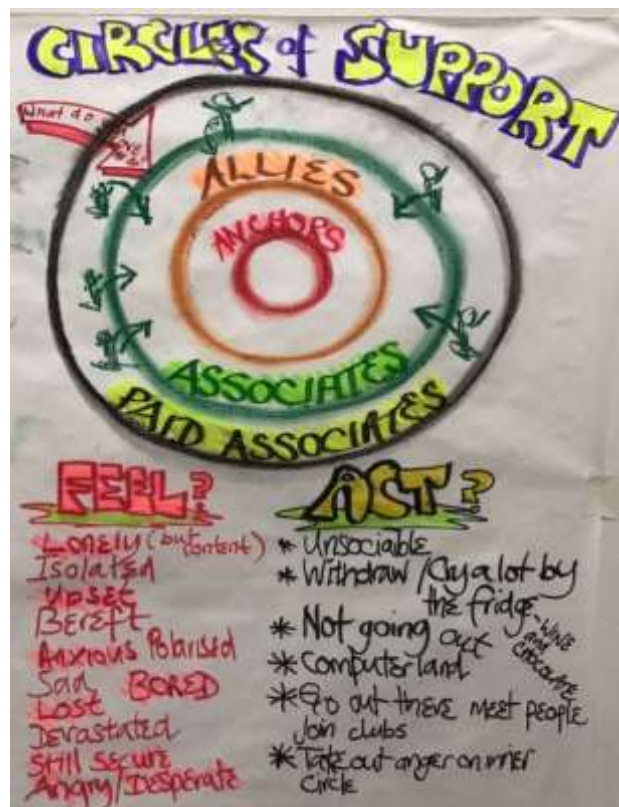
Typical phrases a facilitator might say when facilitating the first 'Circle of Friends' meeting.

- Welcome to [focus child] first circle. You know that I've been to your class and you are lucky enough to of been picked to join your circle. Each person is going to tell you why they have volunteered.
- *Remember a confidentially and ground rule reminder. Include what to do re disclosures of 'worrying things'.*
- Can you guess what lovely things your class has said about you [focus child]? I'm going to ask your circle to tell you what positive things they have said (one at a time).
- To be fair, we also need to say that sometimes things don't go so well. Can you guess what your class might have said? *Focus child given the opportunity to answer first. A few things (max 3) are stated. After each statement check back with the focus child with "does that happen?" to enable them to explain things from their view point.*
- Today we have set up this exciting team of people to help [focus child] get back on track. We want to hear what ideas you all have to help [focus child]. We aren't after ideas that are for adults, but things that you can do. *Circle members talk in pairs and feedback.*
- Out of those ideas, what could you try [focus child]? Who else could help? *The idea is to agree an action that the focus child can do and a person who can support them in doing it.* Are there any other ideas we could try?
- You / we (depending on which adult will be leading future sessions) will be meeting once a week in this room to come back together to see how it goes.
- What name could we have for this group? *Volunteers can make suggestions but focus child chooses final name.*
- How did you feel about being part of this first session for [focus child]? – *Each circle member shares their feelings. Focus child has final word.*

- Give yourself a clap for how hard you have all worked during this first meeting.

Circle of Friends: Top Tips

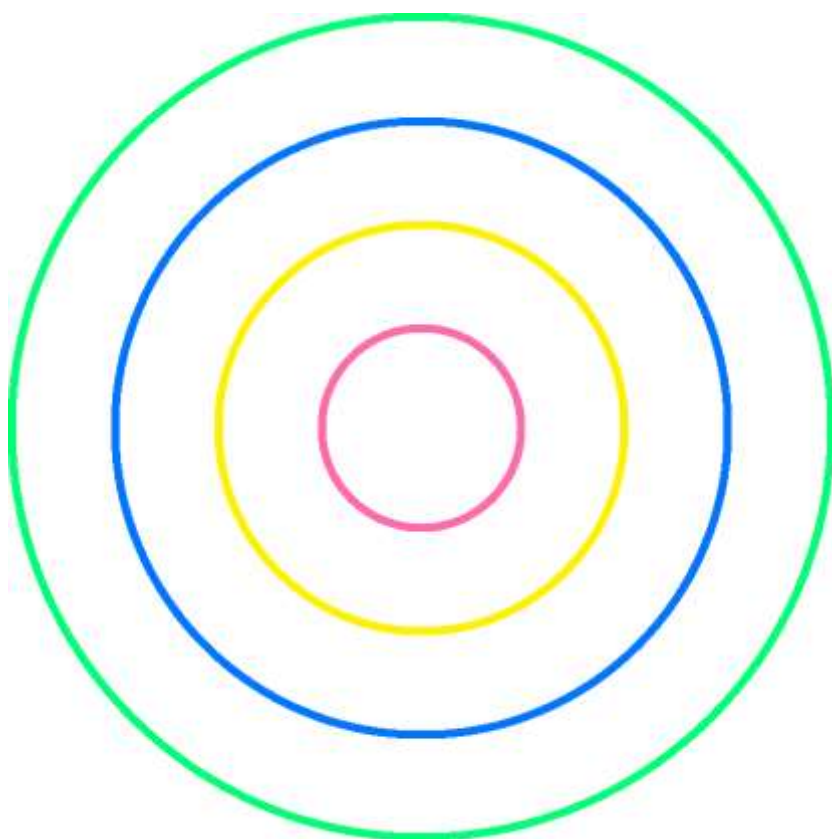
- When recruiting volunteers and during the initial Circle of Friends meeting it can help to have an extra adult in the room. The adult who will be maintaining the work should be in the room.
- The volunteer recruitment and initial Circle of Friends session should ideally be on the same day.
- Record the Circle of Friends meeting in a visual way – an adult could be asked to do this during the initial session and then pupils volunteer at subsequent sessions. See an example on page above.
- With younger children, or those who like structure, it can be useful to provide the circle with a list of set questions.
- To support ‘recruitment of volunteers’ the member of staff who facilitates the session could ask another adult (who is in the room) who would be a good circle member – with a reason. The class are then asked again who would be another good circle member (giving them ownership).
- If no circle volunteers are found the facilitator might ask the class “could some of you get together and help me figure out how we can move forward?”
- If the focus child has limited verbal communication skills, parents or those close to them (siblings, close friend) could be asked if they think that [focus child] would like a circle. During the first circle of friends meeting discuss questions such as “How will we know if the plan is something [focus child] will want?”
- The adult’s role is to facilitate discussions and not to give solutions – it is vital the children and young people have ownership of the circle.
- The volunteers / focus child’s words should be used.
- If the group cannot find a solution to a problem don’t try and fix it, give the problem back to them. Suggest it can be revisited at the end of the meeting or new ideas brought to the next session.
- To gain school support for ‘Circle of Friends’ it can be useful to conduct the ‘[Circle of Support](#)’ exercise with staff and students. Short film clips, such as Dumbo, can also build a sense of empathy for ‘how it can feel to be excluded’. Films that highlight examples of successful inclusion are Happy Feet, Shark Tale, Finding Nemo.



Circles of Support:

Developing an understanding of why 'Circle of Friends' works as a tool for inclusion and community building. View supporting training film clip 'Why Create a Circle of Friends' [here](#).

1. Imagine 4 circles – each filled with different people you know or come across. Fill each from the inside out.



Circle 1: Anchors / Intimate: Who anchors you? Who do you love the most? Who is it hard to imagine life without? E.g. parent, partner, sibling.

Circle 2: Close Allies: Who would you go to in a crisis? Who could you tell a secret to? E.g. best friends and close relatives.

Circle 3: Associates: Who do you share an interest with? Who do you see? E.g. clubs and interests such as youth club, football team, church.

Circle 4: Paid Associates: Who is in your life because it's their job? Who can help 'open-doors'? They may be paid directly by you or through the tax system. E.g. doctor, childminder, hairdresser, social worker.

2. Consider how you would feel if all those in Circle 2 and 3 had abandoned you. How might you act / behave?
3. Imagine being a 14 year old child? How would that feel? Would you be worried about him / her? Why?

If this happened to you, it's unlikely that those in Circle 4 would move closer to you (with the exception perhaps of a foster parent). Those in Circle 2 are often there because they are blood relatives or because a friendship has developed over time. So how can we re-populate Circles 2 and 3?

The only circle we have some control over is Circle 3 – this is filled by those with shared interests and like-minded people. By meeting people through joining clubs and engaging in activities around shared interests this circle can become filled. Overtime, some of these people may graduate into Circle 2.

This situation happens in real life when a child moves to a new school or a young person leaves home to go to university. Universities hold 'Fresher's Week' to support the filling of Circle 3, putting people with shared interests together. Circle of Friends is based on the idea of bringing people together who have a shared interest in supporting the focus person.

Discussion:

- What do / could we do in schools to support the filling of Circle 3?
- If a new person joins an existing class how do we find out their interests and who likes similar things in their class? Can we use this information when deciding who we ask to 'look out' for a new person? Do we have clubs to foster their interests? What else could we do?

Circle of Friends: A Primary School Practice Example

'Circle of Friends' is an approach used to increase the inclusion of a child or young person, known as the 'focus child'. A peer network is built to support the child who may be experiencing difficulties due to their challenging behaviour, social or emotional needs.

The 'Circle of Friends' approach has been taken forward in several West Sussex schools by Learning Mentors, SENCOs, Teaching Assistants or Class teachers. This report is written from the view of a Learning Mentor who has established effective 'Circle of Friends' in various schools.



"We have used the 'Circle of Friends' approach to support several children - for example when a child joins the school mid-year, if a child is struggling to develop effective friendships or in situations when a child's behaviour becomes particularly challenging.

The need to use this approach with a particular child or young person is decided on from class teacher reports, parental comments and senior leadership team referrals. The idea is that the circle will enable the child and their peers to develop empathy with each other and come up with practical peer-based solutions to enable the focus child to move forward in a positive way. The circle is set up in school and runs on a weekly basis for approximately 30 minutes. Feedback on the benefit of the approach and the impact it makes to both the focus child and circle members is also gained. This is through a structured evaluation with the focus child, circle members, parents and the focus child's teacher."

Gaining Parent and Focus Child consent.

"The first step in setting up a 'Circle of Friends' is gaining agreement for the approach. The idea behind the Circle of Friends is explained to the focus child by me (Learning Mentor) and to parents (by the SENCO)."

Recruitment of Volunteers for 'Circle of Friends'

"A session is next held with the focus child's class to explain the approach and recruit volunteers for the circle. The class are given an explanation of the technique, e.g. how the sessions will be facilitated and the long term outcomes that we hope to achieve. The class members are then asked if they would like to volunteer to be an effective part of the focus child's circle. If they want to take part they were asked to write their name and YES on a post it note and likewise their name and NO if they didn't feel it is for them. The responses are collected in by an adult. Throughout the explanation it is reiterated that there is absolutely no pressure to take part; it is perfectly fine to say no and purely a personal choice. Although the focus child knows about the recruitment activity they are not present for the recruitment session as this enables the class to raise questions freely. We normally arrange for the headteacher to give the focus child a special job to do at this time.

There are many volunteers who want to be part of the circle and so with the help of the SENCO and class teacher, who are most aware of the dynamics of each class, a group of six - nine children are selected. A letter is then sent home to the parents of the children who have volunteered explaining the circle, its function and how it will take place in school – this also provides the opportunity for the parent to allow their child to opt out if they felt it not for them. I am delighted to say that this is a rare occurrence!"

The First 'Circle of Friends' Session

“During the initial ‘Circle of Friends’ meeting the focus child is introduced to the volunteers. They agreed on a collective group name and ground rules e.g. taking turns to talk and ensuring everyone had their say. Ideas are also put forward from the children about situations they felt the focus child needs support with; the focus child’s input is also taken into consideration. This enables us to decide on tasks to undertake and agree who would be the best circle member to offer the focus child support for each.

The group meet for thirty minutes once a week and the session is normally led by the Learning Mentor and SENCO. Each session, brief notes are taken (for reference) and time is spent listening to the feedback from the children in the circle as we review the previous week’s tasks. This gives us the opportunity to celebrate success, consider any major incidents and to tweak the focus child’s support.”

Outcomes:

“We have experienced lots of great input and feedback from the circle and focus children on our ‘Circle of Friends’ work – the focus child is far happier to listen and be guided by their peers in this meeting type environment. The circle approach enables us to celebrate success and for all the children to give great feedback. The Class teacher often describes a marked change in the focus child’s attitude and approach to school when they were being guided by the circle.

As a Learning Mentor I have found ‘Circle of Friends’ a powerful primary school tool and a very effective way for the pupil voice to be heard. By making ‘Circle of Friends’ part of everyday school life class teachers are able to see the working mechanics of the intervention for themselves. This means they can then support the children involved in the day to day happenings of the circle and to keep it a positive experience for all. Not only does this benefit the focus child it is intended for, but means it has far reaching benefits for the circle children taking part and often complete class dynamics as a whole.”

‘Top Tips’ for using the ‘Circle of Friends’ Approach

“Ensure an adult collects up the replies from the initial recruiting meeting, this is to make sure the replies stay confidential and nobody’s feelings are hurt by the revealing of individual decisions.

Make sure that all children know who to speak too if they no longer want to be involved in circle work. On the rare occasion a child decides that the circle structure does not work for them we ask that they speak to the adult circle facilitator – the reason behind the circle’s member decision should be individually explained to the focus child before the circle’s next meeting and then to the rest of the group.

Although comments to the focus child are made in a kind way and the sessions are managed so that they are light hearted and informal the focus child may feel under pressure at times and find it hard to be sensible or listen. Set aside some time to talk to the focus child as an individual outside of the circle sessions to allow them to discuss how they are feeling about the circles progress and to give them an opportunity to revisit some of the other children’s comments without the pressure of having them present.

If the focus child begins to ‘order’ circle members around for things that have not been agreed to, it is important to meet individually with the focus child to remind them of the support that has been agreed. If this has little impact, stopping the circle support for a week can help the focus child realise the full range of support the group are actually giving.

Consider the focus child’s long term support plan and include some independence based tasks as the work progresses. This is particularly important as the child transitions to their secondary school.

Hold a ‘half way meeting’ with just the circle children, without the focus child present just to make sure they are all comfortable and happy with the way the circle is running and to give them the opportunity to air things they may not have felt comfortable doing with the focus child present.”

Acknowledgements

This guide has been written in partnership with Inclusive Solutions, parent carers and colleagues who work across a range of West Sussex schools, education settings and organisations. Their support in developing this approach in West Sussex is invaluable.

For further information on Circle of Friends please see Inclusive Solutions website (www.inclusive-solutions.com).

A Circle of Friends resources pack (Book and DVD) can be purchased by following this link. <http://inclusive-solutions.com/product/circles-of-friend-pack/>

This WSCC PCP Facilitators Guide has been developed in partnership with Inclusive Solutions.

