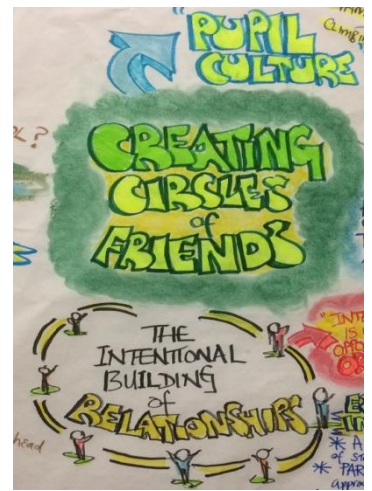


Circle of Friends: A Primary School Practice Example

'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."