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SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICES



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Introduction

Circle of Friends is one strategy or tool that has been widely used to promote social inclusion. It is recommended in Social Inclusion: Pupil Support, Circular 10/99 as an example of best practice along with Circle Time and Peer Mediation. It is particularly used in schools to promote the inclusion of individuals who face exclusion, rejection and isolation from their peers because of their disability, behaviour or some other individual difference.

Teachers have been looking for effective ways of promoting social acceptance and 'Circle of Friends' is gaining increasing recognition across the UK. There is now widespread support for this approach from Educational Psychologists and behaviour support specialists.

Circle of Friends is an inclusive approach to support children experiencing emotional, behavioural or social difficulties in the educational setting by enlisting the help of a peer group drawn from the whole class which is established as a special group/circle of friends. This group helps to set, monitor and review weekly targets in a meeting facilitated by an adult.

Circle of Friends, as a time limited intervention, is appropriate for children in Key Stage 2 and older. It has been used to support children during secondary transfer or moving into a new school context. For younger children and older young people, it may need some adaptation and modification. This approach has also been used to support children with social communication difficulties and with mild autistic spectrum needs, who experience friendship and interaction difficulties as well as children with more significant disabilities, who may need a longer-term circle.

This booklet contains practical advice on setting up and running a Circle of Friends. Standard letters, certificates and recording proforma for the weekly review meeting can be adapted and customised to meet school's needs. A further set of suggested activities for follow-up sessions with the small group has been developed by a group of Assistant Educational Psychologists in Buckinghamshire, who have also been undertaking ongoing evaluative research.



What is the Circle of Friends intervention?

Circle of Friends is an inclusive approach to support children experiencing emotional, behavioural or social difficulties in school by enlisting the help of the peer group of the whole class and setting up a special group/circle of friends. This special group helps to set, monitor and review weekly targets facilitated by an adult.

What are the objectives?

- To improve social skills, confidence, self esteem
- To access peer support for a target child / young person
- To reduce inappropriate behaviour
- To encourage understanding of relationships at a range of levels

What are the key benefits?

- Enlists peer support and empathy for an individual
- An inclusive approach - can be used for a wide range of difficulties and presenting behaviours
- Improves self esteem and confidence of the target child and others
- Brings problems into the open and allows discussion making it an effective anti-bullying strategy
- Contributes to the social and personal development and citizenship curriculum
- Supports the class teacher, group tutor
- School-based intervention
- Minimal resource implications – mainly time and a quiet place for 30 minutes a week

What is needed in school?

- *Desire to change* or to make a difference for a child or young person experiencing difficulties, rejection, isolation or at risk of exclusion
- *Commitment to follow up* - needs 20 - 30 minutes per week for the small group/inner circle plus an agreed adult (Class teacher, group tutor, Headteacher, SENCo or support teacher)
- *Agreement of all parties* – child/young person, parents/carers, class teacher/ group tutor, SENCo, headteacher
- School needs to decide on how inner circle of friends is composed
- School needs to decide on how to inform other parents and to gain informed consent.

Informed consent is very important. Some standard letters can be found in the Appendices.



Preparation and commitment are crucial to the success of the intervention/strategy

How to set up a circle

(This could be facilitated by an Educational Psychologist, Behaviour Support Teacher, Group Tutor, Year Head, Senco. The Class Teacher and the adult who will be facilitating the weekly review sessions should attend. Practice suggests that an external facilitator is preferable)

Whole Class Session

40 – 60 minutes should be allowed for this part of the intervention.

- Whole class session, target child not usually present, run by someone trained in the intervention. The target child should be happy with this arrangement and found an alternative constructive activity
- Class sit on chairs in a circle with class teacher, EP and other adults as appropriate
- Someone to scribe/keep notes/write posters
- Objectives explained
- Warm up/ ice breaker activities to set the scene

How to start the session

It is important to set the scene and create a safe, trusting and relaxed atmosphere. Ice breaker games are helpful:-

- to introduce the idea of something special
- to create group identity
- to enhance listening skills
- to reinforce ground rules
- to have fun

Suggested ice breaker and warm up activities

- Pass the smile
- Sentence completion e.g. “ My favourite colour/food is.....” followed by a game to mix the group
- Fruit salad - each child told name of fruit, they then change seats when fruit is called out - all change for “fruit salad”
- Paint pot - similar to above using colours

Setting the scene by explaining the objectives

- why we are here?
- to ask for help from children / peer group
- to help focus child / young person



Circle of friends: An Effective Intervention for Pupils with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties?

Introduction

This paper provides an outline of the Circle of friends approach, explains its research basis and summarises existing research evidence on its effectiveness. It then briefly reports the positive results of a systematic evaluation study carried out by Buckinghamshire and University College London and identifies areas where further research is needed.

The Circle of friends Approach

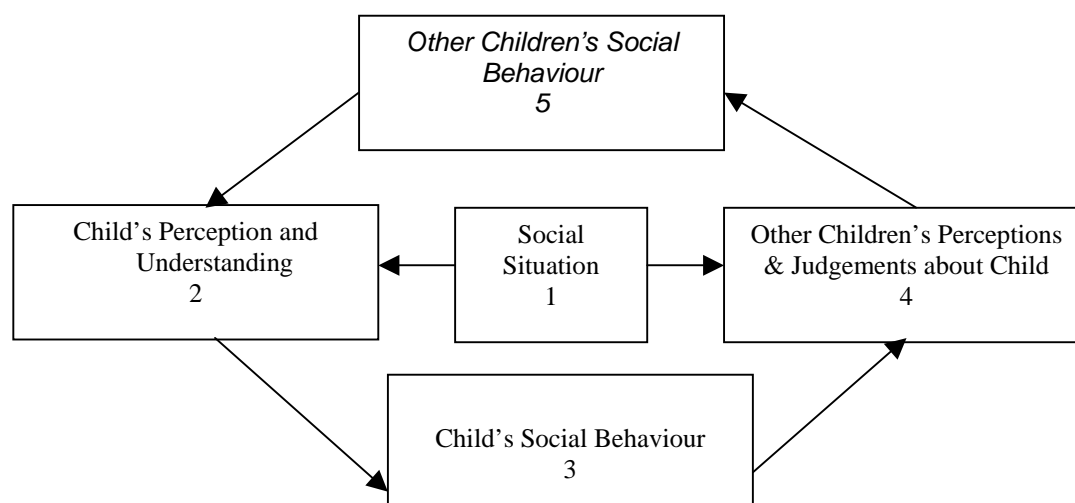
Circle of friends is an inclusive approach to support children experiencing emotional, behavioural or social difficulties in the educational setting by enlisting the help of the other children in their class and setting up a special group, or 'circle of friends'. The special group helps to set, monitor and review weekly targets in a meeting facilitated by an adult. The group members also provide support to facilitate the focus child's inclusion and to help achieve agreed targets.

The Research Basis of Circle of friends

The research basis for this approach is provided by interactive models of social competence. Figure 1. shows the model developed by Dodge, a leading authority on aggression in childhood and adolescence. This model takes account of a wide range of influences on behaviour and the ways in which they interact:

- within child factors, such as ways in which the child thinks and feels as well as their skill levels;
- situational factors, such as aspects of the physical environment as well as the framework of rules and management practices adopted by adults;
- other children's responses, which includes their perceptions and interpretations of a child's behaviour as well as what they say and do in response.

**Figure 1 A Model of Social Interaction in Children
(adapted from Dodge et al, 1986)**



Circle of Friends

