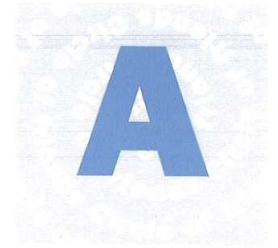


Why use Circle of Friends: the rationale



The 'Circles of Friends' approach was developed in Canada* to support the inclusion of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties into mainstream schools within their student group. It is a peer support system which harnesses the collective strengths of a group of peers for the benefit of all group members.

The process has also been found to be very successful in developing social and communication skills in the older (from Year 4) able student with a diagnosis of autism, Asperger syndrome, Tourette's syndrome or another similar but undiagnosed disorder. It has been used extensively by education services in Essex, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. It works through the development of an understanding of, and empathy with, the different perspectives that we all bring to any social setting, leading to an acceptance of individual differences.

Students with autistic spectrum disorders have an inherent difficulty in understanding and establishing social skills. This difficulty, in turn, leads to an inability or impaired ability to gain access to the very settings in which such skills are practised, rehearsed, adapted and developed. The Circle of Friends approach ensures the opportunity for the provision of these contexts and settings and the understanding of the real difficulties being experienced by the student.

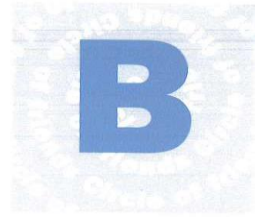
The Circle aims to develop problem solving and citizenship skills in all group members. Unlike many commercially produced social skills development programmes, it uses the peer group knowledge of their own social code to address issues as they arise, within their own social setting, in order to promote inclusive solutions.

This pack has been researched and developed by the author, in conjunction with mainstream primary and secondary schools in Essex. It has been actively revised and updated over a six month period during which the video, disc and support materials were devised. Teachers using the Circle of Friends approach have reported observable benefits and changes within the six weeks it takes to run the circle.

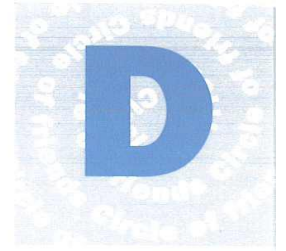
This pack, for use with students aged eight years through to the end of secondary school, contains all the information needed by school staff. In order to update continually our research into the success of this approach, we would appreciate completion and return of the evaluation form (8) enclosed..

* Pearpoint, J., Forest, M. and Snow, J. (1992) The inclusion papers. Toronto. Inclusion Press.

Pre-requisites for establishing a Circle of Friends



- Agreement must be sought from the focus child and the parents of the child. The parents and the school must agree that the child is developmentally ready to use peer support, including listening to and coping with others' opinions and being prepared to contribute to the Circle.
- The school, including the headteacher and governors must agree to value the Circle by giving it status, time, a peaceful meeting place and adult support.
- Time must be allowed for the initial class meeting (which is not usually attended by the focus child). This establishes the principles of the Circle and the recruitment of volunteers. This session can take from 30 minutes to one hour.
- Consent for their child's participation must be gained from the parents of volunteers.
- Time must be put aside for the weekly meetings by the focus child, volunteers and the named adult.
- Written minutes of the outcomes of each week's Circle should be shared with the remainder of the class. Their ideas should be sought and valued. Some schools use tutor group time, RE or PSE lessons for this feedback session.



The aims of the approach

- 1** To create a support network (Circle of Friends) for a focus student.
- 2** To encourage all members of the Circle including the focus student to acknowledge and celebrate each others' differences.
- 3** To give a support network for the identification of social and communication skills needed by the focus student.
- 4** To offer strategies for the development and generalisation of these skills in a range of settings and contexts.
- 5** To support an understanding of the needs and perceptions of the focus child, by both the Circle and, via feedback, to the whole class/tutor group.
- 6** To develop problem solving and citizenship skills in all group members.