

Circle of Friends

Guidance for using Circle of Friends produced by Kent Educational Psychology Service.



What is a Circle of Friends?

Circle of Friends is an intervention, developed by Pearpoint et al., (1992), that aims to develop a support network of friendships around an individual who may be experiencing isolation from their peer group. This individual is referred to as the 'focus' pupil. Circle of Friends is an inclusive intervention which enlists the support of the focus pupil's peer group in providing support and engaging in problem solving with the focus pupil.

Usually, this intervention starts with a whole class meeting, which leads to the selection of five to seven pupils who form a Circle of Friends. This group of pupils including the focus pupil help to set and review weekly targets in a weekly meeting facilitated by an adult.

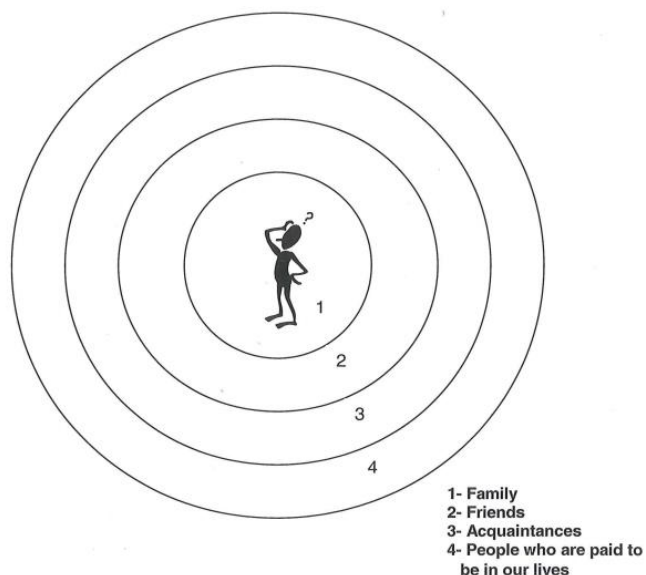
Who is Circle of Friends for?

We all need friends, allies, and associates to surround and support us through life. We can view the different relationships in our lives by using 'relationship circles':

Circle	Relationship	Description
1. Circle of Intimacy	Family	The people in this circle are the people who are closest to us. They are the people we could not imagine living without, for example family members and best friends.
2. Circle of Friendship	Friends and close relatives	These are the individuals we can confide in and expect to support us during difficult times.
3. Circle of Participation	Acquaintances	The individuals we see regularly in our daily activities, for example at school and clubs. We may 'hang out' with these people.
4. Circle of Exchange	People we pay to be in our life	The people who are paid to be caregivers or provide us with a service, for example teachers, doctors, hairdressers, dentists etc.

Circle of Friends is an effective intervention for developing this support network around a child or young person. It tends to be used for:

- Pupils who do not have friends or who have empty Circles of Friendship and Participation.
- Pupils who have difficulty establishing friendships or do not automatically form friendships at school.



- Pupils who experience communication and interaction difficulties or social, emotional, and mental health difficulties. These children or young people often experience feelings of isolation, loneliness, or rejection from their peers.

Why create a Circle of Friends?

- Circle of Friends supports inclusion and social cohesion of all children and young people.
- The peer group can have a powerful impact in supporting an individual to alter their behaviour (Newton et al., 1996). In addition, a Circle of Friends can change the behaviour and attitudes of peers towards the pupil experiencing difficulties (Hassani et al., 2021).
- Research suggests that children and young people who experience peer rejection are more likely to experience poor academic attainment; truant or drop out of school prematurely; and experience mental health problems in later life.
- Circle of Friends can be used to support transition.
- Circle of Friends develops the social and emotional skills of all members of the group. It can improve confidence, social skills, and self-esteem of the focus pupil in addition to developing the skills of other group members. Skills that may be developed, include: the ability to listen, to reflect, to empathise, to problem solve, to understand, identify and cope effectively with feelings (both self and others) (Hassani et al., 2021).
- Supports and encourages staff to reflect upon their views and practices, leading to more inclusive approaches, resources, and policies.
- Creates a whole-school ethos of social support.

How to create a Circle of Friends

Before starting the approach:

- 1) Before starting a Circle of Friends, obtain the support of the school and the parents/carers of the focus pupil. Written consent should be sought from the parents/carers. Next explain the approach to the focus pupil and obtain their agreement for this intervention to occur. A general letter to the parents/carers of the focus pupil's whole class should also be sent. This should detail the Circle of Friends approach. Consent from parents/carers of the Circle members is also required. Appendix A provides example consent forms.
- 2) The commitment of a consistent staff member to run the weekly meetings with the group will need



to be sought. This could be the focus pupil's class teacher, a learning mentor, the SENCo etc.

Whole class meeting:

- 3) Hold a whole class meeting. This meeting is usually led by someone not familiar to the class and tends to last approximately one hour. Start the meeting by talking to the class with the focus child present to show that they agree with the meeting. The meeting is then held without the focus child. The person who will be leading the weekly group sessions is present throughout. Appendix B provides an example of the structure for this meeting. This meeting finishes with the selection of the Circle of Friends members.

Initial meeting of the Circle:

- 4) The first meeting of the Circle is important as it sets the scene. This meeting should occur as soon after the whole class meeting as possible. It is usually led by both the facilitator of the whole class meeting and the adult who is going to run the weekly groups. Appendix C provides an example of the structure for this meeting.

The key principles of the Circle meetings are:

- Mutual support and trust. The members of the Circle are there to support the focus pupil's inclusion.
- The focus pupil must feel listened to and supported. They should not feel threatened by the process.

Weekly meetings of the Circle:

- 5) The Circle should meet weekly, ideally at the same time each week. Generally, these meetings last approximately 20-40 minutes and should be led by someone familiar to the pupils who has observed both the whole class meeting and the initial meeting of the Circle. As the sessions progress the meetings tend to become less frequent, especially in secondary school. The Circle should run for at least 6-8 weeks, but this will vary depending on the complexity of the issues and the make-up of the Circle. Appendix D provides a suggested structure for these meetings.

Evaluation of Circles:

To determine the 'success' of a Circle of Friends in improving the social inclusion of the focus pupil, the intervention should be evaluated after an agreed number of weeks. An accessible way to do this is using questionnaires to assess a range of aspects of social competence. These questionnaires should be administered both before setting up the Circle of Friends and at the end of the intervention. Examples of possible questionnaires could include the Social Inclusion Survey (Frederickson & Cameron, 2001) and B/G Steem Scale (Mains and Robinson, 1988).

Further Resources

Videos to demonstrate a Circle of Friends:

Primary Setting - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHtWDNmaC_E

Secondary Setting - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYCsvr_rQLc

Useful resources:

'Creating Circles of Friends: A Peer Support and Inclusion Workbook' by Colin Newton and Derek Wilson (2003)

Research:

Frederickson, N., Warren, L., & Turner, J. (2005). Circle of Friends – an exploration of impact over time. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 21 (3), 197-217.*

James, A., & Leyden, G. (2010). Putting the circle back into Circle of Friends: A grounded theory study. *Educational and Child Psychology, 27 (1), 52-62.*

Schlieder, M., Maldonado, N., & Baltes, B. (2014). An Investigation of " Circle of Friends" Peer-Mediated Intervention for Students with Autism. *Online Submission, 6(1), 27-40.*

References

- Frederickson, N., & Cameron, R. J. (Eds.). (2001). *Psychology in Education*. Nfer-Nelson
- Hassani, S., Alves, S., Avramidis, E., & Schwab, S. (2021). The Circle of Friends intervention: a research synthesis. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 1-19*
- Mains, B., & Robinson, G. (1988). *B/G Steam. A self-esteem scale with locus of control items*. Lucky Duck Publications
- Newton, C., Taylor, G., & Wilson, D. (1996). Circles of friends: an inclusive approach to meeting emotional and behavioural needs. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 11(4), 41-48*
- Pearpoint, J. (1992). *The Inclusion Papers: Strategies to Make Inclusion Work. A Collection of Articles*. Inclusion Press, Ontario

Appendix A – Draft Consent Letters

For parents/carers of all children in the class:

Dear Parents/Carers,

The school is at present running an initiative to support the inclusion of students experiencing difficulties in school.

This initiative, known as Circle of Friends, has had some success in various school in Kent and across the United Kingdom. As well as providing support for the young person experiencing difficulties, there are benefits for all those involved. The circle provides valuable learning experiences for pupils and aims to develop problem solving and citizenship skills and links to the school's PSHE curriculum. It helps pupil to develop their ability to think through problems and helps with their understanding of themselves and others.

Setting up the Circle of Friends includes the following steps:

- A meeting with the whole class (which takes roughly one hour) aimed at identifying those interested in being part of the Circle of Friends. This will be facilitated by (...)
- Regular meetings of the circle, which is usually made up of 6 to 8 children and an adult facilitator (...). These meetings usually last 20-40 minutes and focus on developing solutions and ideas for sorting out difficulties.

If you wish to discuss this initiative or find out more about it, do not hesitate to contact (...) at the school. If you do not wish your child to participate, please complete the slips overleaf.

Yours sincerely,

For parents/carers whose children have volunteered to be part of the Circle of Friends:

Dear Parents/Carers,

Our school has recently set up a Circle of Friends. The aim of the Circle is to help one particular pupil develop friendship and social problem-solving skills.

Your child is one of six pupils who has volunteered after a class discussion to be a member of the Circle. The group will meet once a week for approximately 20 minutes, with a teacher and the focus pupil. The aim is to discuss any successes and difficulties that have occurred over the past week, and to come up with ideas for resolving any issues.

This approach is not new and has been used successfully in many schools in the United Kingdom. All pupils benefit from the experience. In particular, it develops the ability to understand other people's feelings and to think through problems.

We are delighted that _____ has volunteered to be in the Circle and hope that you are happy with their decision to become involved. If you have any concerns or questions, please feel free to contact (...).

Yours sincerely,

Focus pupil's parental consent form:

Dear _____,

This letter is a formal request for your consent, following a discussion during which you agreed to us setting up a Circle of Friends for _____.

Once you have returned this consent form, we will be able to start the weekly meetings of the Circle of Friends.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

I, the parent/carer of _____ consent to him/her being the focus pupil in a Circle of Friends for the agreed time period of _____ weeks. I understand that, following this, the situation will be reviewed.

Your child's name: _____

Your name: _____

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B – Suggested Structure for Whole Class Meeting

MEETING WITH CLASS

approx. 1 hour Led by a facilitator (someone not familiar with the class)
Class teacher present
Member of staff who will lead the group present

Need: flip chart, pens and paper, sheets with 4 circles on, also blue tack for displaying sheets.

Introductions

What we are trying to do?

To talk about what it means to have friends

To look at different types of friends.

To talk about what it is like when you have not got any friends.

To help someone we know who does not have many real friends at present.

WHO ARE OUR FRIENDS?

What do we mean by the word “friend”?

What is a friend? How do you know?

Different people that we know

We know some people better than others, but we don't call all of them friends.

Most people are usually friendly, depending on who they are and what contact we have with them. But we usually like to choose our closest friends, usually others about the same age as us, people with whom we feel we have something in common.

Give out sheets with 4 circles, headed "Circles of friends".

Need a pencil, but do not put name on sheet.

What you write is possibly very personal and private, will probably not want others to see it.

What sort of people are closest to you, those you care about most of all?

Suggestions- parents, brothers, sister, grandparents**.

Put names or draw pictures of them in the **centre circle**.

Possibly not more than 5 or 6. All very special people.

**it is important to be aware of any 'looked after' children in the class and be sensitive to their different family situation

In the **second circle**, put your best friends, those you really like spending time with—some people may find it easy to think of names—some people find it more difficult—that's normal.

In the **third circle**, put some of the other people who are not best friends, but they could be, people you are happy to have around you—again some people may find it easy to think of names—some people find it more difficult—that's normal

In the **fourth circle**, put those people who are friendly towards you, possibly people who are paid to be a part of your life, such as teachers....

4 different types of people whom we could refer to as being friends, some very close who you see very frequently, and probably argue with most, some who we don't see so often, and probably don't argue with at all.

Think about the people you may have put in circles 2 and 3 (be very sensitive an on the lookout for any child who finds this difficult- they may also benefit from a Circle of Friends in the future).

How would you feel if you had no one in circles 2 and 3?

Think about it for a minute, if there were no names that you could put into either circle.

No really close friends that you could talk to, and no one that you got on fairly well with.

How would you be feeling if that were the case?

Get list, put on board.

Does having people that you like around you affect how you behave?

How do you think that you would behave if you had those feelings?

Get list, put on board.

How many of you think that you would behave like this if you had no friends?

What you have written down is your secret list.

It is personal and confidential to you.

What does confidential mean?

Why is it best not seen by other people around us?

What we are now going to talk about is confidential to this class, it's private, and what we will be discussing will be a class secret.

We are going to do something very unusual, to talk as a class about someone who is not with us at the moment, someone who your teacher and other teachers feel has not got many friends at school.

Who might that be?

Why shouldn't we usually talk about people when they are not around?

Very critical, might not be true, they have no defence.

It's OK if we just stick to discussing good things about them,

but the discussion does not usually stop there, it usually becomes very critical, and that can be very unpleasant.

As it happens, knows that we will be talking about him/her.

I met him/her earlier and **he/she gave me his/her permission** to speak to you in this way.

What I want to do is for us to discuss **the good things about**, the things that we like about him/her.

Then we will be looking at **the difficult things about him/her**, the problems he/she causes, the things that we don't like about him/her.

The teachers and I need your help with this, as you know him/her much better than we do. We are trying to help and **we can't do it without you**.

When we have all got a better idea about what we could do to help him/her, we would like to get a small group of about 6 or 7 volunteers together, to meet with one of the teachers and, to be a special group of friends to him/her, to see if we can all help him/her to be happier and more friendly.

Can you give us a hand with this?

So, can you tell me why our discussions in this session should be confidential?

First of all, let's make a list of the positive/easy things about, the things he/she does well, the things we like about him/her.

Get list, put on board.

Now for the harder bit, especially when we are in a group like this, what are the things people find difficult about what does/how he/she behaves?

It's very important to make sure that what you are saying is absolutely true, otherwise what you have to say will not be helpful to anyone.

Get list, put on board.

Compare this list with previous list of behaviours by someone who felt that they had no friends.

Is it possible that behaves in this way because he/she thinks that he/she has not got any friends?

One final list, what are the things that are unhelpful for, the things that make him/her behave badly, or make his/her bad behaviour worse?

What things have you seen happening that wind him/her up?

Get list, put on board.

I now want a group of about 6 volunteers, 6 people who can be special friend, who are going to be a support for, who are going to help to feel happier in school.

(Class teacher needs to be prepared beforehand to pick others from the same year group, those who have contributed to the discussion, someone sitting near, and not just those who have no problems with behaving.)

Class teacher selects a group of 6.

I will be meeting the group, the circle of special friends, tomorrow morning, with, to see how we can help him/her.

But even if you are not in the group, all of you can be helpful by being especially friendly to, particularly thinking about the things that happen in the classroom that make him/her behave badly.

Can someone tell me again why we need to keep our discussion confidential, so that what we have talked about stays safe in this class?

Appendix C – Initial Meeting with Circle of Friends

MEETING WITH CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

30 – 40 minutes

- 1) Introduction to group.
Get names of group members

- 2) Agree ground rules and explain confidentiality.
We are here to help.

We are going to be sensible.

What we are discussing is confidential.

- 3) Warm up game

- 4) Agree aims of group
e.g. **to help** **make and keep friends** and help him/her to not get into trouble.

- 5) Invite group members to tell why they volunteered to be in the group.

- 6) If you wish to evaluate changes for all the group, then take baseline data.

- 7) Elicit from the group and list the positive qualities of

- 8) Elicit from the group and list the areas the group needs to work on to help
..... .

- 9) Brainstorm strategies.
Make a note of all suggestions.

All suggestions are potentially useful, no criticisms permitted.

Can any suggestions be improved?

- 10) Agree which strategies can be tried and ensure commitment from the group.
- 11) Be clear with the group about responsibilities, disclosures, and boundaries. Let them know what is expected of them and the limits to this.
- 12) Agree name for the group, avoiding child's name.
- 13) Describe the meeting and follow up arrangements, further weekly meetings, with teacher/facilitator, and encourage mutual support in the group.
- 14) Ending game

Appendix D – Suggested Structure for Group Meetings

Always use activities that are appropriate to the needs of the group especially the focus child.

- Start with a warmup activity
- Reminder of rules and confidentiality
- Discuss the previous week:
 - o What went well? Why did it go well?
 - o What did not go so well? Why didn't it go well?
- Agree problem area/s
- Problem solving and active listening
- Group members generate further support strategies
- Agree strategies with focus pupil and Circle members
- Remind everyone of the arrangements for the next meeting.
- Finish with a short, fun group cooperation activity.