

Circle of Friends

This is an alternate version of the characteristics overview chart on the next page. It is provided for accessibility.

Verbal skills

- Nonverbal
- Mixed
- Verbal

Grade Level

- PK
- Elementary


Cognitive Level

- Classic

Areas Addressed

- Communication/Speech
- Social/Emotional

Circle of Friends

 Verbal Skills	Grade Levels	Cognitive Level	Areas Addressed
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nonverbal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Classic	<input type="checkbox"/> (Pre)Academic/ Cognitive/Academic
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mixed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Elementary	<input type="checkbox"/> High Functioning	<input type="checkbox"/> Adaptive Behavior/ Daily Living
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Verbal	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle/High		<input type="checkbox"/> Behavior
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Communication/Speech
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Social/Emotional



Brief Introduction

Two of the most significant characteristics of students with autism (AU) are lack of emotional expression and absence of age-appropriate social skills, which lead to little social integration and limited peer acceptance. Even though individuals on the spectrum make attempts to initiate interactions, such as asking questions or greeting people, the results are usually less successful and less reciprocal than those of neurotypical peers. The “circle of friends” intervention is a useful and practical tool for promoting inclusion of students with special needs into the school community.



Description

The circle of friends intervention is a peer-based approach, paralleling the inclusive education policies of encouraging students with special needs to get involved in the school community by engaging in peer groups and practicing social skills. Typically, a circle is formed by a group of volunteers, usually peers and classmates, a student with social difficulties as “the focus child,” and an adult facilitator.

The circle works as a team to (a) discuss the challenges that the focus child faces in terms of social interaction, (b) set up goals and targets to improve peer relationships, and (c) brainstorm strategies to reach the goals. The purpose is to include all students to establish friendships and encourage peer interactions with the student with AU.

Many students with AU have benefited from this intervention, particularly in the area of social integration, peer interaction, and decreased anxiety. Research has shown improvements in empathy, problem solving, communication skills, emotion expressions, and awareness of individual ability (Barrett & Randall, 2004;

Whitaker, Barratt, Joy, Potter, & Thomas, 1998). The focus child, in particular, gains more attention from members of the friendship network, which makes him/her feel more accepted by the group. The behavior changes are relatively noticeable in the process of this intervention (Whitaker et al., 1998).

The “circle of friends” intervention takes place in inclusive educational settings and usually involves class members in daily school activities. The environment should be friendly, encouraging, and positive.

Steps

The following steps may be used to establish a circle of friends (Taylor, 1997):

1. *Establishing prerequisites.* A suitable school environment is selected and a commitment of the necessary resources is obtained (30-40 minutes of teacher time to facilitate meetings). The parents and the focus child are also contacted.
2. *A discussion with the class or tutor group.* A meeting is conducted with class members to discuss the strengths and challenges of the focus child and to encourage peers to build experiences of friendships with the child. At the end of the meeting, volunteers are selected from the class to form the circle. The volunteered group members are socially competent peers with positive attitudes towards the focus child. They are told to be continually assisting the focus child in the areas that have been discussed.
3. *Establishing a circle.* The circle includes six to eight volunteers, the focus child, and an adult facilitator. The circle group meets and works collaboratively with practical adjustments using a problem-solving approach. That is, the objectives are subject to change according to the progress of the focus child.
4. *Weekly meetings of the circle.* The circle group and school staff meet weekly to review progress, identify difficulties, and present solutions.

Brief Example

Lisa is a third grader. She wants to make friends, but she is mostly alone at recess and during lunch where friendship opportunities usually present themselves. After reviewing her social difficulties and her attempts to establish friendships, the school staff approached Lisa and her parents with a full explanation of the purpose and objectives of the “circle of friends” and proposed realistic potential outcomes according to Lisa’s social needs. With the permission of Lisa and her parents, the “circle of friends” intervention was designed to help Lisa get involved in the school community.

At the first meeting, the general and special education teachers and the school psychologist talked to the whole class about the strengths, uniqueness, and challenges Lisa exhibited as well as the meaning of friendship. This was to acquaint Lisa's peers with Lisa and to create positive peer attitudes toward her. Afterwards the objectives and goals of specific social skills, such as turn taking, were listed, and students were asked to volunteer to participate with Lisa in a circle of friends. Six to eight volunteers from the class were selected to form this group. The group outlined the rules and was told to work on specific skills that Lisa lacked during group activities. They decided to practice turn-taking skills during lunch conversation.

The circle meets every day during lunch with Lisa and an adult facilitator. During the 30-minute lunch period, they share stories, experiences, and thoughts. Mostly, the team encourages Lisa to engage in appropriate communication with circle friends by demonstrating, redirecting, and reinforcing.

After a month, the team and the school staff meet to discuss Lisa's progress and set future goals. Lisa feels more comfortable interacting with peers and knows that mutual conversation involves two parties sharing opinions instead of her expressing her own thoughts all the time. Lisa feels more accepted at school and she is making efforts with the circle team to establish social relationship continuously.



Tips for Modifications

The original circle of friends does not include the focus child during discussion of needs and difficulties. The adapted version proposed by Shotton (1998) emphasizes the importance of the focus child joining the discussion to allow the child to understand his/her strengths and challenges and to set realistic goals to establish social relationships. This modified version may incorporate more self-awareness and self-determination strategies into the process of discussion and evaluation.

Another adaptation of the traditional circle of friends involves two or more children with special needs in a class and making all members in the circle the focus children (Barrett & Randall, 2004). Whether to include the focus child in the awareness meeting generally depends on the child's characteristics or comfort level.



Summary

The circle of friends intervention is a peer-based approach taking place in a student's natural school environment with least intrusive features. The purpose is to assist the student with AU in becoming included in the school community as a result of developing various social skills. The intervention is considered socially valid because it helps establish social interactions with peers.



Research Table

# of Studies	Ages (years)	Sample Size	Area(s) Addressed	Outcome
5	3-10	37	Social skills, social integration, peer acceptance, inclusion, teachers' perception, peer attitude	+



Studies Cited in the Research Table

- Frederickson, N., Warren, L., & Turner, J. (2005). "Circle of friends" – An exploration of impact over time. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 21*(3), 197-217.
Fourteen primary-aged children with special educational needs, including one child with AU, participated in this naturalistic study. Results showed increased social inclusion of the focus children. However, the child with AU did not demonstrate measurable improvement.
- Kalyva, E., & Avramidis, E. (2005). Improving communication between children with autism and their peers through the 'circle of friends': A small-scale intervention study. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 18*, 253-261.
Five preschool boys with AU, 25 typically developing peers, and 5 teachers participated in this study for three months. Results showed a significant increase in the number of successful responses and initiations made by the focus children.
- Carter, C., Meckes, L., Pritchard, L., Swensen, S., Wittman, P. P., & Velde, B. (2004). The friendship club: An after-school program for children with Asperger Syndrome. *Family and Community Health, 27*, 143-150.
Ten children with Asperger Syndrome participated in two groups of a friendship club with parents and leaders acting as facilitators. Specific topics/concepts were selected for each classroom or community activity to teach children with Asperger Syndrome appropriate social skills to maintain friendship. Verbal feedback from participants and parents was positive.
- Gus, L. (2000). Autism: Promoting peer understanding. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 16*(3), 461-468.
This study used an adaptation of the whole-class session of a circle of friends for a boy with AU in a circle group of 10-year-old students. Results demonstrated changes in peer attitudes toward the boy.

5. Whitaker, P., Barratt, P., Joy, H., Potter, M., & Thomas, G. (1998). Children with autism and peer group support: Using 'circles of friends.' *British Journal of Special Education*, 25(2), 60-64.
Seven circles were set up to establish circles of friends for seven children with AU and their volunteer peers. Results showed improved social integration, reduced anxiety, and improved behavior for target students. Findings also demonstrated positive impact on other circle members in terms of empathy, self-esteem, and group participation.



References

- Barrett, W., & Randall, L. (2004). Investigating the circle of friends approach: Adaptations and implications for practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 20(4), 353-368.
- Carter, C., Meckes, L., Pritchard, L., Swensen, S., Wittman, P. P., & Velde, B. (2004). The friendship club: An after-school program for children with Asperger Syndrome. *Family and Community Health*, 27, 143-150.
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- Kalyva, E., & Avramidis, E. (2005). Improving communication between children with autism and their peers through the 'circle of friends': A small-scale intervention study. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 18, 253-261.
- Shotton, G. (1998) A 'circle of friends' approach for socially neglected children. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 14, 22-25.
- Taylor, G. (1997). Community building in schools: Developing a 'circle of friends.' *Educational and Child Psychology*, 14, 45-50.
- Whitaker, P., Barratt, P., Joy, H., Potter, M., & Thomas, G. (1998). Children with autism and peer group support: Using 'circles of friends.' *British Journal of Special Education*, 25(2), 60-64.



Resources and Materials

- Circle of Friends: www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/socialcircle.html
This article is an explanation of circle of friends written by the parent of a child with AU.
- National Autistic Society-Leicestershire County Council, England: Autism Outreach Team: <http://www.leics.gov.uk/search.htm?qt=circle+of+friends&col=all&flag>
This link includes an extensive list of resources for setting up and continuing a circle of friends program.
- Falvey, M.A., Forest, M., Pearpoint, J., & Rosenberg, R. L. (1997). *All my life's a circle*. Ontario, Canada: Inclusion Press.
- Greenway, C. (2000). Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Strategies to promote prosocial behaviours. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 16(3), 469-486.
- Schlieder, M. (2007). *With open arms: Creating social communities of supports for kids with social challenges using circle of friends, extracurricular activities, and learning teams*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
These articles and books overview how to develop a circle of friends for students with AU.