

# Moving in circles

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## Using a 'Circle of Friends' to support the inclusion of a pupil with Down syndrome into a mainstream infant school



### Introduction

Circle of Friends is an approach devised with the specific aim of including children with special educational needs into mainstream education. It uses a different perspective in supporting children with behaviour or social isolation difficulties; rather than focusing on a

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'within child' solution it is more concerned with promoting peer group acceptance of the child with special educational needs. This is based upon the rationale that pupils exhibiting distress via their behaviour are likely to become isolated within their peer group, causing exacerbation in their behaviour and locking them into a cycle of ever more extreme behaviour and further isolation. Therefore, if the isolation of the child can be reduced this will support a modification in their

behaviour and in turn raise their confidence and self-esteem.

Circle of Friends principles have been used to support pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties; however, they have also been successful in supporting pupils attending a new school and in including children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who have difficulties in the areas of social interaction and communication.

In addition to supporting vulnerable children, Circle of Friends also can have a major impact for adults and children as it gives opportunities and a framework within which the participants can develop skills in empathy, problem solving and listening.<sup>[1]</sup>

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### Format for establishing Circle of Friends

1. The permission of the parent/guardian of the focus child.
2. The child's agreement that they would like a 'friendship group' – after the implications have been explained to them at an appropriate level of understanding.
3. An initial meeting of the focus child's class, while the child is absent to discuss the child's difficulties. Within this process,

each child is given a paper with four concentric Circles on it. The innermost circle is usually the child's closest family with whom they usually live. The second circle represents extended family and best friends who they usually see on a regular basis. Circle three tends to be people children see on a regular basis but possibly as acquaintances rather than friends. The outer circle usually includes people who are paid to look after the child's interests, e.g. teachers, doctor, lollipop-lady. Children are asked to complete each of their circles and discuss how their 'friends' make them feel, with an interactive session on outlining why each of our circles of friends is important to us and eliciting from the class their feelings of what it might be like not to have many of our different 'supportive friends' and how we might exhibit those feelings through our behaviour. These feelings and behaviours may then be identified with the focus child by the class group.

4. Having made the connection between the Circle of Friends and the focus child the class are asked for volunteers to fulfil the role of friend in the focus child's second circle. This can be done in a number of ways but a secret ballot is often appropriate as this tends to identify classmates who have volunteered without verbal coercion and enables the adults to select the group of 5-8 pupils without having to publicly reject volunteers. It is important

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that those children not chosen should still try to play an active role in the third circle for the focus child.

5. The first meeting establishes ground rules for the group, a group name, and each individual friend is asked to express a positive statement about the focus child and why they want to be his/her friend.

The group also needs to be guided towards realistic and honest help they can give to the focus child to assess their specific needs. It is this guidance that will help the 'Circle of Friends' to identify specific difficulties and problem solve resolutions. After the initial meeting, the group are likely to meet on a regular weekly basis. The adult-facilitator for this group should, where possible, be chosen by the target child as someone they trust and have built up a relationship with. For a more detailed description of this process please see Newton, Taylor and Wilson 1996.

Although this process presupposes that all the children involved can, with guidance, verbalise their feelings and views this was not the case with Victoria, a child with reception Down syndrome in the reception class, whose behavioural difficulties were not necessarily emotional but rather communicative in essence and therefore required an innovative approach by her Circle of Friends.

The practical implementation of this process and its impact within the school and family is described below by the school staff and Victoria's mum, Liz.

## Vicki's story

This is Vicki's Story about how well inclusion has worked for her with her many difficulties.

Spring 2001 saw the arrival of Vicki's statement, which was a marathon read, outlining not only her educational needs, but her many medical problems too. First impressions posed the question "Which area will we try to address first?" We decided that the best course of action was to meet Vicki.



Mrs Slough, our Head Teacher arranged to visit Vicki and her twin brother Tom, at Oaklands Day Nursery, in Yardley. Tiny, blonde and with a mop cap partly obscuring bright eyes; we were aware that Vicki's communication skills were poor and we were concerned that she wouldn't be able to hold her own with her peer group: how wrong we were! Within 10 minutes, she had refused to hand over a pretend cup of tea to Mrs Slough as she hadn't said "Please"! What she lacked in speech she made up for with body language and sheer personality!

Vicki and Tom then spent a week of half-day visits at St Alphege Nursery to meet their future classmates before starting full time education that September. At Mr and Mrs Reynolds' request the twins were placed in different classes giving them both the chance to form their own friendship groups and to develop as individuals.

After a brief 'honeymoon' periodic problems began to arise. Vicki was tiny, pretty and vulnerable – quite doll-like and our school abounds with kind, caring children and that admirable quality was too much for Vicki to cope with. She wanted to play but didn't want to be the toy; she wanted kindness but didn't want to be smothered; she wanted friends but didn't want to be bossed around. Vicki reacted in the only way she could – and started to push, scratch and bite. Playtimes were becoming a catalogue of incidents.

Initially, I went out to play with Vicki but that was not going to be the long-term solution and certainly was not supporting integration. I tried talking with regular 'victims' having observed them in the play-

ground fussing over Vicki, but this only worked in the short-term. I tried a 'buddy' system but this was not very successful as the buddy was hampered by Vicki's inability to join in with energetic play and soon got disheartened.

Poor Vicki was having a tough time and really didn't understand why she was getting into trouble for defending her space in the only way she knew. It is important to remember that Tom was aware of what was happening and of course, the parents had to be informed of any major incidents, which must have been upsetting.

This seems like a litany of negative incidents, however, from the moment Vicki and Tom were offered places at St Alphege, support was forthcoming from all of the various agencies who had been involved in their early years and most important of all there was good *communication* between parents and professionals. At her review meeting, we requested help from Mr Steve Kraemer, Educational Psychologist, who suggested a Circle of Friends and offered 'in-school' training and support for the PSD teacher, Mrs Rosemary Hope and myself. I have to admit that I was slightly sceptical having seen an American video of "A Circle of Friends", which had alarmed me with its critical approach to the child, but willing to try anything the training was set up speedily. Following the training I withdrew Vicki from a lesson whilst her classmates were invited to indicate whether they would be willing to help Vicki in the playground, the situation was explained simply as the children were only 4 and 5 years old.

Ten names were drawn and parental permission was obtained for these children to be part of the Circle of Friends. Mrs Hope and I held the first meeting, having decided that it should be held during a 20-minute assembly slot. We used a comfortable area and everyone, including Mrs Hope and myself, sat in a circle

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– I did not sit next to Vicki. We introduced the Circle of Friends as an aid to all of the children.

At the start of each meeting, we would go around the circle discussing each child's week – good and bad. Within this discussion, Vicki would say how she had coped and the other children commented, I was pleasantly surprised that the other children didn't take this opportunity to tell tales on Vicki, they were

just incredibly supportive. As Vicki is a Makaton signer, she was able to communicate through me; the other children were fascinated with Makaton and so we began to incorporate a signing session into the meetings. Once the children had mastered a few signs we

played games such as 'Simon Says' and, as Vicki could join in, it kept her as a full member of the group. We also used a Makaton 'sing-a-long' video and signed and sang along – not for the faint-hearted! From the meetings the children decided to protect Vicki at a distance from over-attentive children, two of whom had been purposely included in the Circle of Friends. At one meeting the children said they were having difficulty with a few of the older children

who would not listen when a Reception Class child told them to leave Vicki alone and they suggested we involve two Year 2 children in the group. We did and it worked! A greater understanding and tolerance towards Vicki's problems of communication and her physical disabilities was achieved. Vicki was not being seen as different, but a friend with a problem.

By the end of Reception, we had ceased the meetings as Vicki was happy in the playground and incidences of retaliation were few and far between. She was treated as an ordinary little girl. Now, nearing the end of Year 2, we celebrate Vicki's successes – she is valued for her kindness, her humour and her determined struggle to succeed. Her classmates are aware of her problems partly due to Mrs McDermott,

Vicki's class teacher in Year 2, suggesting that as part of PSD they should devote several Circle Times to looking at different disabilities. The children were now able to empathise with Vicki's special needs.

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In consultation with her Junior School we have prepared the way for a Circle of Friends to be formed in Year 3 should it be felt necessary in order to aid integration. I am working in tandem with her KS2 LSA for the last month of Year 2 and the first month of Year 3 for several hours per week.

This is Vicki's Story so far; we strongly feel that the sensitive introduction of the Circle of Friends prevented what was a concern from becoming a problem.

The Circle of Friends approach was not only successful within the school environment but also had a beneficial effect on Vicki's family as mum describes below.

### Mum's experience

When Vicki started school, we had many concerns about how she would cope and how she would fit in. Coping with the work and the general day-to-day run of things were areas where we thought Vicki would struggle. However, friendships were our first real hurdle.

It became clear quite early on in the first term that Vicki didn't know how to deal with the fuss and attention that she was getting. Vicki is a small pretty blond little girl and she attracted much attention from others, particularly older girls, who wanted to mother and look after her. All with good intentions, I might add! However, it was on the advice of our Educational Psychologist, Steve Kraemer, that we establish a Circle of Friends for Vicki. The results were almost instant. Biting and hitting stopped, and she developed real friendships. The Circle learnt simple Makaton signs and songs, and with the support of Mrs Griffiths (Vicki's

LSA) and Mrs Hope (PSHE Co-ordinator) they developed into a lovely group of friends.

The results were two-fold; I had parents come up to me in the playground saying how much their child enjoyed being a part of Vicki's circle. Since then, Vicki has been able to make her own friends and has had the same group of friends throughout her time in the infants. I am sure that these friendships will continue into juniors, and we are indebted to the effort put in by both the staff and children involved.

### Conclusion

Vicki's story shows that a multi-disciplinary approach to problem-solving, using Circle of Friends, can provide an effective support for including children with relationship-building difficulties, even when they are compounded by a significant speech and language delay. The success of this intervention was based upon a positive outlook and belief that the intervention could be successful by all those involved in the process, including the children, who worked with imagination and the adults who facilitated the Circle of Friends.

### References

1. Newton, C., Taylor, G. and Wilson, D. (1996). Circles of Friends – An inclusive approach to meeting emotional and behavioural needs. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 11(4).

#### See also:

*Creating Circles of Friends: A peer support and inclusion workbook.* By Colin Newton and Derek Wilson (2003). Nottingham, UK: Inclusive Solutions UK Ltd. ISBN 0-9546351-0-8  
Web Site: <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com>

See pages 60 and 66 for more details and a review of this publication.

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