

# Children with autism and peer group support: using 'circles of friends'

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**Philip Whitaker (Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist, Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service with specialist responsibility in autism) and members of the Leicestershire Autism Outreach Team describe the rationale and process of establishing 'circles of friends' to support seven youngsters with autistic spectrum disorders, six of whom were attending mainstream schools.**

## Introduction

The 'circle of friends' approach is one of a range of strategies originating in North America aimed at promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. The central underpinning of the inclusion movement is the tenet:

'that all persons should be equally valued, provided equal opportunities, viewed as unique individuals and be exposed to and learn from and about people with diverse characteristics.'

(Stainbeck & Stainbeck, 1992, p.3)

A circle of friends is a concrete and practical tool for working towards the realisation of the values emphasised above. It offers a means of including vulnerable and marginalised youngsters into the school community by harnessing its creativity and commitment. As Newton, Taylor and Wilson (1996) point out:

'It is a systemic approach that recognises the power of the peer group – and thereby of pupil culture – to be a positive as well as a constraining or exacerbating influence on individual behaviour.'

(p.42)

Just as isolation or rejection can damage the individual's sense of self, acceptance and friendship can foster growth and enable him or her, in turn, to contribute to the community of which he or she is a part.

Newton and his co-authors also point out the links between this technique and specific approaches such as 'circle time' (Bliss & Tetley, 1993) and the 'No Blame' response to bullying (Maines & Robinson, 1993), which may be more familiar in UK schools. All require staff to share their responsibility with pupils and all promote and value each individual's capacity to view the world from the perspectives of others.

The process of establishing circles is succinctly described by Taylor (1997) and comprises the following steps:

- 1) *Establishing prerequisites*, which involves selecting a school with a suitably supportive ethos and negotiating the necessary commitment of resources (typically 30-40 minutes of teacher time weekly to facilitate a meeting involving six to eight students). The parents and the *focus* child are then approached.
- 2) *A discussion with the class or tutor group*, which is usually undertaken by an outsider, focuses on the child's strengths and difficulties and invites class members to empathise with him or her and to build on his or her own experience of friendships. Volunteers to form a circle are sought at the end of this meeting.
- 3) *Establishing a circle*. A representative group of six to eight volunteers meet with the focus child and an adult facilitator. The class discussion is summarised, a collaborative approach to problems solving is established and practical arrangements determined.
- 4) *Weekly meetings of the 'circle'*. The children and the member of the school staff meet weekly, jointly reviewing progress, identifying difficulties and planning practical steps to resolve them.

## Social difficulties and peer interactions of youngsters with autism: the potential of 'circles of friends'

The impairment of social interactions is one of the core diagnostic and defining features of autistic spectrum disorders (and is regarded as a primary feature of autism) which is compounded by, but is not simply a secondary consequence of, impairments of communication and imagination (Wing, 1996). Relevant research is at an early stage and empirically based guidelines for intervention are scarce (see Lord & Magill-Evans, 1995). Systematic observations in naturalistic, integrated settings by these authors go some way towards identifying what 'goes wrong' (at a behavioural level), and found that individuals with autism were much less likely to co-ordinate their use of eye contact with smiling or other behaviours. Of particular significance was the low rate of response received by youngsters with autism when they did attempt to initiate interaction. Lord and Magill-Evans drew the conclusion 'that the normally developing children being targeted in these initiations did not recognise that they were being approached'. (p.623).

Roeyers (1995) offers a succinct overview of approaches to intervention and draws attention to the restricted opportunities which children with autistic spectrum disorders often have for peer interaction, and to the self-perpetuating nature of their difficulties. He reports an intervention which achieved a significant improvement in social behaviour, using what he terms 'a peer-mediated proximity approach'. In other words, socially competent

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children were put in contact with children with autism and were instructed to 'interact', but were not given any specific training on how to do so, nor were they asked to target any specific behaviours or responses in the child with autism. The approach was contrasted with those in which peers were explicitly used (and trained) as social skills instructors. Roeyers (1995) argues that this approach has a longer lasting and more generalised impact.

Without systematic intervention, youngsters with autistic spectrum disorders who are placed in mainstream schools are likely to encounter and present substantial difficulties arising from their problems with social interaction, however generous the level of additional staffing. Active avoidance of peer contact, compounded by high levels of well-intentioned adult support, may reduce the youngsters' opportunities to learn from their peers and prevent the establishment of supportive peer relationships. More typically, particularly in pupils with Asperger syndrome, there is an interest in (and even desperation for) friendships. Problems in establishing reciprocity and in perspective taking, combined with pragmatic communication difficulties and rigidity, can all undermine the pupil's attempt to establish and maintain peer relationships. Active 'rejection' or 'ignoring' can be the consequence, leading to intense emotional responses (often featuring anger and depression) which serve to perpetuate the difficulty.

The authors all work with pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (many of whom attend mainstream schools or provision which is not 'autism-specific'). The account by Newton et al. (1996) of the use of circles of friends to support pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools seemed to offer promising potential in our own efforts to address the social interaction difficulties of the youngsters with whom we worked. In establishing 'circles' we had a number of aims:

- to create a setting in which the 'focus child' could be brought into regular, supportive contact with more socially competent peers (Roeyers, 1995, for example). By providing a degree of structure we hoped for more successful and mutually reinforcing interactions to occur, and that these would be continued outside the circle session;
- to offer a context for working directly on aspects of the triad of impairments, particularly the impairment of a lack of social interaction. The availability of appropriate peer models and a format and process geared to the encouragement of *perspective taking* appeared to offer considerable potential;
- to recognise that the social impairment of people with autism is a fundamental and pervasive difficulty. Progress and development can occur but the pace of change is likely to be slow. Whilst every effort needs to be made to remediate impairments, we also believe that it is essential for the environment to be adapted to accommodate these difficulties. We believe that the pupils with whom we worked should be accepted for who they are, as well as for what they might become. We hoped that the circles would

promote such acceptance, offer emotional support and reduce the sense of isolation of which these pupils are often painfully aware;

- to address specific problems by harnessing the creativity of the members of the circle, and their understanding of the peer culture in specific schools.

### **The project**

Six circles were set up to support pupils in years 3 to 10 of mainstream schools, and one in a school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. All the 'focus children' had been diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders, were the subject of Statements of Special Educational Needs and were supported by Leicestershire's Autism Outreach Team. The nature of the autistic difficulties of the seven 'focus children' varied widely, ranging from subtle manifestations of Asperger syndrome to classic presentations of higher functioning autism. The schools involved had an ethos compatible with the values underlying the 'circles approach'. The first meeting with the 'focus child's' class was led by a member of the Autism Outreach Team, but the class teacher had final responsibility for selecting six to eight youngsters from the pool of volunteers, keeping a gender balance and maintaining diversity. As well as the obviously competent and caring, the circles included some youngsters with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and some whom it was felt would benefit from participation in the project. The subsequent circle meetings usually took place during lunch-times (in order to avoid the disruption of lessons) and the first six meetings were jointly led by a member of the Autism Outreach Team and a member of staff from the school. Subsequent meetings were run by the school, with members of the Autism Outreach Team acting as consultants. At the time of the evaluation, the number of circle meetings ranged from 3 to 17, a number largely reflecting the speed at which preliminary negotiations were conducted.

### **The evaluation**

Given the diversity of youngsters supported and the limited resources, there was no possibility of acceptable experimental controls. Consequently, the evaluation was intended to be illuminative, focusing on the perspectives of the various participants and on their subjective impressions of their experiences. We were interested to discover whether the project was considered to be worthwhile (by both the focus child and the circle members) and if there were any problems or difficulties. Interviews were conducted with the member of the school staff with responsibility for the circle, the focus child, his or her parents, and the circle members. Information was also collected from other staff in the school.

With the exception of interviews with the focus child, the evaluation was carried out by staff who had not previously had contact with either him or her, or his or her school. A range of techniques was used, including structured interview schedules and, with circle members, a questionnaire followed by a discussion. Interviews with parents were carried out by a trainee educational psychologist.

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The following summary of the outcomes of the evaluation process looks both at its overall value and at the themes and issues which emerged in discussions with the participants.

### **The circle leader's perspective**

#### *Improved social integration and higher levels of peer contact*

Despite the somewhat misleading term, circles of friends are not created with the explicit intention of establishing friendships between the focus child and group members. None of the circles actually targeted friendships, although it was hoped that closer relationships might be fostered during extended contacts. In the event, the circle facilitators commented spontaneously on the improved quantity and quality of contacts between the focus child and the wider peer group (beyond the circle), a development which was generally attributed to changes in the focus child, rather than in the peer group, and was seen to be a product of both an increased *desire* for contact and a reduced *anxiety* about making contact. One significant benefit was a reduction in the focus child's needs, and demands, for adult support. Although based on the circle facilitators' subjective accounts, the reported improvements are in keeping with predictions based on Roeyer's (1995) account and the observational study reported by Lord and Magill-Evans (1995).

#### *Reduced anxiety*

Four of the seven circle facilitators mentioned a general reduction in anxiety in the focus child whom they described as 'bubblier', 'happier' and 'more relaxed'. They viewed this improvement in the youngster's well-being as intrinsically worthwhile, but also felt that it contributed to a reduction in behavioural difficulties.

#### *Improved behaviour*

The format adopted for circle meetings had, at its core, a problem-solving sequence of identifying problems, setting targets and devising strategies to meet these targets. In practice, most circles concentrated largely on the overt actions of the focus child: either on challenging behaviour or on visible and intrusive stereotypes such as compulsive hair brushing. One circle tackled the problem of one youngster being drawn into 'play fighting' which resulted in people being hurt. Another group worked to help a pupil to eliminate anxious hand chewing by using a stress relief object. Specific obsessions, such as a need to be first or a fear of prams brought into the playground were also tackled with some degree of success.

#### *The drawbacks*

There was no reported deterioration in pre-existing problems in any of the focus children. Five of the circle facilitators reported no drawbacks, but two commented on what might be summarised as 'increased egocentricity'. These pupils had been the centre of attention and had developed what was described as 'a sense of self-importance' and 'turning everything to her own advantage'. In both cases, the focus child displayed the characteristic difficulty found in children with

autistic spectrum disorders of lacking any intuitive grasp of the principle of reciprocity in relationships: they were unaware of, and uninterested in, the needs of others, and were unable to detect or respond to growing resentment. In both situations it may be necessary for the facilitator to intervene in the group process in order to address this difficulty and to meet the needs of circle members. In two other circles, the process seems to have occurred quite spontaneously, with circle members beginning to form a mutual support network and to bring their own issues to the circle.

### **The impact on circle members**

#### *Increased levels of empathy and improved understanding*

All the circle facilitators spontaneously identified increased levels of empathy and improved understanding as significant and intrinsically valuable benefits arising from participation. Even where improvements in the focus child were slight, short-lived or overshadowed by remaining difficulties, experiences in the circle seemed to help members to understand the focus child and to reduce the extent to which his or her behaviour was taken personally. In this context it is worth emphasising the positive impact of the introductory session with the whole class, in which members were asked to comment on what they found difficult about the focus child and what they valued about him or her. All pupils seemed to benefit from the opportunity to own and express negative feelings, and from having their concerns taken seriously by an adult. This experience seemed to help them to avoid a blaming orientation towards the child with autism and allowed a more balanced acknowledgement of his or her strengths as well as difficulties.

#### *Enhanced self-esteem*

Four facilitators commented on the sense of competence and pride which seemed to result from the circle's collective efforts to support the focus child.

#### *Improved group participation*

In three of the circles, it was felt that there had been significant improvements in the ability of participants to engage in productive group discussions.

#### *Benefits for individual group members*

In their responses, four of the facilitators commented on the improvements in circle members. The teacher's perspective on one pupil with emotional and behavioural difficulties had shifted significantly as a result of seeing his sensitive and enthusiastic participation in the circle. A second pupil, with similar difficulties, was showing improved behaviour outside the circle, whilst two very quiet children had begun to find their voices and to contribute more confidently.

#### *No significant problems*

Five of the seven facilitators could see no problems or disadvantages for the circle members. Two mentioned specific circle members becoming distressed when faced with unexpected and intense reactions from the focus child during the circle discussions.

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## Personal and professional responses

### *A worthwhile experience?*

All of the circle facilitators rated the experience as a worthwhile (4/7), or very worthwhile (3/7), use of their time.

### *New insights into circle members: professional rewards*

When asked what aspects of the experience they had found most professionally rewarding, all the facilitators commented (with a degree of surprise) on the commitment and sensitivity displayed by circle members. Their capacity to respect the ground rules, to take on new roles and their ability to be *fair* were highlighted.

### *Keeping the circle going, keeping the focus child focused: professional demands*

All of the facilitators experienced the tension between helping the group to function constructively and giving them the responsibility for the process and the content. Formally establishing ground rules, allocating roles and keeping to a set agenda seemed to be helpful. Equally important was the ability to judge when to intervene directly if, for example, the focus child was becoming unduly distressed. More generally, staff had to take an active role in helping to maintain the attention of the focus child and in interpreting or rephrasing contributions from circle members. Two facilitators had to cope regularly with the focus child's anxiety or excitement in anticipation of the circle meeting.

### *The views of colleagues*

Facilitators all reported good levels of support from their colleagues and the staff groups of three schools responded to a short questionnaire about their perceptions. Fourteen of the 16 respondents rated the social skills, behaviour and happiness of the focus children as having shown an improvement; none felt that the circles had resulted in any additional problems.

## From the circle members' viewpoint

### *'It's good to help'*

When asked to identify the 'good things about being in the circle', 32 of the 52 pupils mentioned their enjoyment of being able to offer help to someone else. Statements such as, 'I feel I'm doing something good' and 'it's taught me to be a better friend' were offered with self-evident pride and pleasure, suggesting that there is something fundamental and intrinsically satisfying about this form of involvement. It is also encouraging to note that schools still have the potential to protect, nurture and harness altruistic concern for others.

### *'... developing ourselves...'*

Whilst two circles have explicitly developed in the direction of providing mutual support, the replies of circle members suggested that all circles had this function to some degree, for some members. Reference was made to helping resolve the problems of participants other than the focus children. Older circle members also mentioned that participation in the circle had enhanced their self-expression, had helped them to understand others and had

enabled them to see 'both sides of the question'. An attempt was made using the B/G Steem (Maines & Robinson, 1993) to measure changes in the self-esteem of circle members over time and to compare them with those of classmates (who had not been involved in the project) over the same period. In the event, data for only three classes were collected, but almost 70% of the circle members showed an improved self-esteem over the life of the circle compared with less than 50% of their classmates over the same period.

### *Achieving targets*

Where groups had set explicit targets, which had been achieved, there seemed to be higher levels of satisfaction. Understandable frustration was felt when the group, for whatever reason, did not feel that it was making any progress, and consequently, it was often helpful to negotiate a shift of focus to an alternative or less ambitious target.

### *'... and we'd do it again!'*

Out of 52 circle members, only four said they wanted to discontinue their involvement in the circle. Forty expressed a desire to carry on, and similar figures were obtained in response to a question about whether they would recommend involvement in a circle to a friend.

## Problems and concerns

### *'... missing lunch times...'*

In many schools lunch-times are brief and hurried, and although circle meetings only lasted for between 20 and 30 minutes they effectively lasted for the entire lunch-time for staff and students, a problem that was mentioned by one in three of the circle members.

### *'... challenges to personal skills...'*

A high proportion of older students found that the interpersonal skills required were complex and demanding. In particular, they mentioned the challenge of being supportive to the focus child, while at the same time offering constructive criticism. How to respond when apparently being ignored, and what to do when apparently responsible for triggering a tantrum, were also issues commented on by a number of circle members.

### *'... the autistic "difference" ...'*

The focus children displayed a range of features typical of autistic spectrum disorders which added to the challenges faced by circle members. The difficulties of engaging with someone who does not provide conventional non-verbal signals, who does not always appear to pay attention or to understand one's language were frequently commented upon. Older circle members were also aware of a more subtle, but pervasive, difference in their relationship with the focus child. However warm and supportive they were, they appeared to lack reciprocity. As one youngster commented, '... B always wants things off you... wants more than a friend...'. Another pupil stated (of a different focus child), '... she thinks you're part of her property...'. Circle members found the opportunity to help someone intrinsically rewarding and gained great satisfaction from seeing targets attained.

Relationships with the focus child, however, often appeared 'unbalanced', with circle members needing to give, whilst receiving little back directly at an interpersonal level.

### What parents said

'... *unqualified enthusiasm...* '

The parents of all the children involved expressed great enthusiasm for the circles. Despite the fact that their children spontaneously volunteered little information, many benefits were claimed. Improved sociability and a more outgoing style were themes which recurred in the parents' descriptions.

'... *changing friendship patterns...* '

Five of the parents mentioned that their child usually preferred to play with children who were significantly younger. They commented upon a shift towards play with same-age peers, and attributed it to participation in the circles. In discussing the future, however, five parents expressed a hope that the circles should be seen to benefit all participants, and concern was voiced about the possible effect of, 'always being the one with the problems'.

'... *changing the environment...* '

Despite this worry, all the parents acknowledged that their children's difficulties were likely to be long term. Whilst optimism was expressed about the reported changes, parents also recognised that there were likely to be limits to the extent of any changes within their children. Five parents viewed the setting up of the circles as a significant enhancement of the support available to their children in school as, in effect, the environment was adapted to accommodate their children.

### Friends or not?

The commitment and enthusiasm of circle members was often moving. As well as coming to the circle meetings,

40 of the circle members reported working, playing or spending time with the focus child in school. And yet only three circle members referred to the focus child as a friend. Only one focus child had been invited home by a circle member and one had been visited at home (by four members of his circle).

In the way they were established and run, circles were based on an assumption of 'unequal competence' and, in effect, circle members were there to *help* a less competent peer. There was widespread recognition of positive attributes, greater understanding of difficulties and a much reduced tendency to blame the focus child. Nevertheless, to date, the focus children remain predominantly recipients of support rather than equal participants in a mutually supportive relationship, although it is clear that these relationships have been significant for many participants, and have had the power and potential to foster growth and change in both parties.

### Postscript

A year after the completion of this evaluation, all the circles continue to run with only occasional, consultative support from Autism Outreach staff, and almost all of the original participants and all of the focus children continue to be involved. Further circles have been established in schools and similar benefits have been informally reported. On the basis of this study it is impossible to know the extent and nature of any actual changes in behaviour which can be directly attributed to the work of the circles. What is indisputable, however, is that the circles have provided a means of mobilising and expressing support of a very practical nature, at a very limited cost and with few, if any, discernible drawbacks for any of the participants.

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