

NESTS TIP SHEET

A GUIDE TO SETTING UP A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

WHAT IS A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS?

Put simply, a “Circle of Friends” is resource group established to socially support any learner who is having trouble in establishing strong social bonds in their peer group. Generally, the student needing support is a student on the Autism Spectrum, but there is no reason why other students can’t benefit from being involved in this type of support.

In Australia, NESTS have seen Circles operate successfully in all age groups from Prep to Year 12.

HOW DOES A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS OPERATE?

The Circle is made up of a group of students who have volunteered or been asked to act as supportive peers for a particular *focus student*. Whether you choose students or ask for volunteers will very much depend upon your school setting.

Ideally a Circle will contain between 6 and 12 students, as well as, a caring teacher and the school psychologist. You must obtain parent permission for all students to participate in the Circle. *Sample letter available at bottom.*

The Circle then meets regularly, usually weekly, to support the student on the Autism Spectrum. Meetings may be held at lunchtimes or during classes depending on your school’s resources.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF A “CIRCLE OF FRIENDS”?

The aim of the circle is to sets goals and develops strategies to support the student on the Autism Spectrum, but importantly these strategies also support all the members of the group.

The Circle ultimately benefits all students as they increase and develop inter-personal skills.

A Circle of Friends has **succeeded** if the student on the Autism Spectrum is an accepted and valued member of the peer group, who is supported and understood. Ultimately the Circle has succeeded if the student on the Autism Spectrum feels safe at school and can tell you that they have friends.

HOW LONG WILL/SHOULD THE CIRCLE LAST?

A successful Circle of Friends takes at least two school terms, or 16 weeks to work its magic. In the past we have run Circles for a year, meeting weekly in Term 1 and then fortnightly in Terms 2 and 3, with a celebration in term 4.

A Circle of Friends is a long-term commitment, but the rewards matter and in the long term the Circle will reduce time spent on many other issues.

BEGINNING YOUR CIRCLE OF FRIENDS...

Once you have established your student participants it is time to begin meetings.

1.

Your first step depends very much on the *focus student* you are supporting. In some cases, it is important to begin by teaching all the members of the Circle about the focus student's strengths and weaknesses and give a quick outline of what autism is and how it affects the focus student. This is usually done without the focus student being present. This then provides an opportunity for the Circle members to ask questions or express concerns.

Be mindful that these students will probably already know the focus student and may have some preconceptions that need to be addressed.

2.

Now it is time to begin meetings.

In the first meeting of any circle it is important that all the students introduce themselves and share a little about the things they enjoy and don't enjoy so much at school. This often leads to a lively discussion and reduces nerves.

3.

Use these ideas to make a list of topics for future meetings.

At each meeting the Circle discusses a specific topic and looks for solutions, using role play, games, discussions and personal experience.

From experience the students will always have something to discuss and often may have observed the focus student experiencing a difficult and will share ways to support that.

For example, in one session a student asked *"Why the focus student was so often in the change rooms at lunch?"*

This led us to find that he went there to use his laptop to play games because laptops were not allowed to be used outside. From this a huge discussion commenced about what activities you can enjoy at lunchtimes. Finally, the Circle decided with the focus student, on Mondays he could go to Chess Club with a Circle member, use his laptop in the library on two days (which is permitted) and then be invited to play outside twice a week. This social support proved timely and valuable for all Circle members, several of whom also admitted that finding things to do at lunch if you don't enjoy football is tricky.

Areas we have focussed on in the past include:

- Getting lost
- Routines
- Personal space
- Waiting your turn (not interrupting)
- Entering play
- Emotional regulation
- Parties (going to parties but also when you are not invited)
- Unstructured time (inside and outside the classroom)
- Playground - changing the rules
- Organisation/losing things (what to do when you need to start work)
- Body language /gestures

4.

Extending the Circle to the wider school community

Successful Circles often wish to expand their activities to include other peers and this is wonderful.

In the past Circles have run a wide variety of activities for the students not in the Circle as friend and fun raising events have included:

- Talent quest
- Orienteering challenges
- Fund raising raffles or guessing competitions
- Assemblies to teach other students about a social or environmental issue e.g. recycling

We hope you found this guide How to Successfully Establish and Run a “Circle of Friends” useful.

Remember, inclusion matters. Implementing a Circle of Friends at your school or educational setting is an incredibly powerful way to foster inclusion among all students. And it allows teachers and educators to reach the students who need it most.

NESTS Education
Cressida & Jamie

Sample Permission Letter

Dear Classroom Parent,

Many of you already know [child's name], either from having had a child in his class in kindergarten or first grade or through other [school name] associations. If you are new to second grade, you may not know him. [child] usually acts like a typically developing second-grade student. However, he is on the Autism Spectrum [or other specific different ability], which affects his communication and social interactions with adults and peers. Our goal this year is to help [child] make connections with his peers by learning from friends at [school]. We are implementing a program called "Circle of Friends" to help with his social skills and to promote a greater understanding about his behaviours.

We hope that [child]'s "Circle of Friends group will consist of children who have agreed to be a friend to [child] after seeing a brief presentation that the school counselor and [child]'s parents have prepared. The presentation is about [child], his social issues, and what he likes to do. [child] does not always understand how to ask peers to play or to ask for help and sometimes uses approaches and behaviours that are typical for a child on the Autism Spectrum but that can confuse or even concern children who do not understand them. He has difficulty detecting social nuance, and motor and sensory issues can also lead to problems with his peer-peer interaction. Your child's participation is purely voluntary and your child can choose to stop participating at any time. The Circle of Friends is primarily intended as support and friendship for [child] during specifically difficult times for a child on the Autism Spectrum, which includes recess, lunch, and transitions into and out of the classroom.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call or contact the school counselor or [child]'s parents, [parent's name(s)]: phone _____, or email _____.

(Cut here and return to child's classroom teacher)

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS – Permission Slip

Student Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Teacher: _____

Phone Number: _____

E-mail: _____