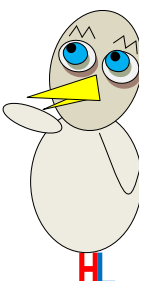
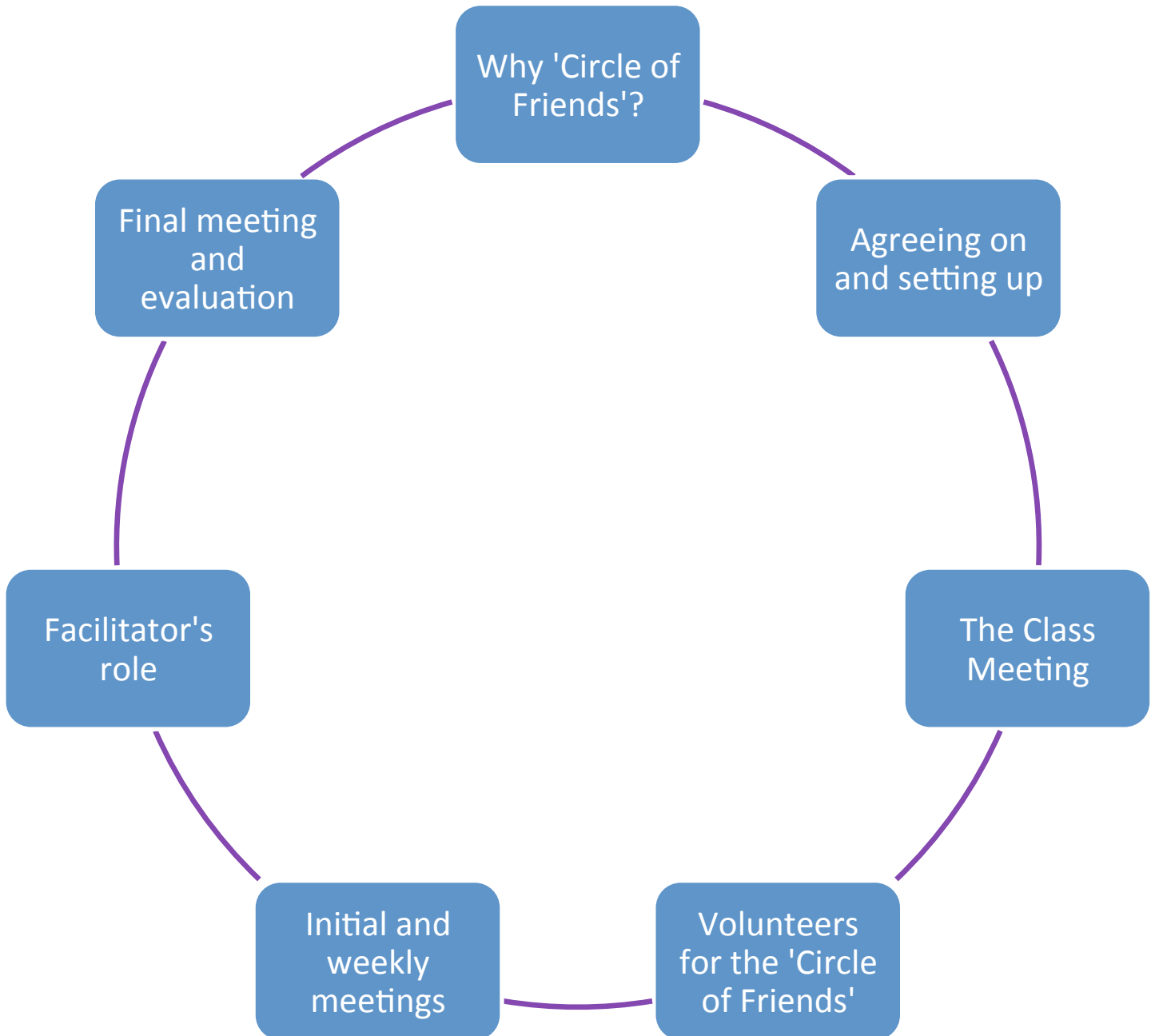
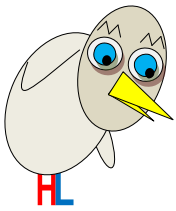


# Circle of Friends

A step by step guide for class teachers and facilitators





## Why 'Circle of Friends'?

Concerns will have been raised about a particular child. This focus child will be experiencing difficulty with their peers. This might be shown in number of challenging behaviours including any of the following examples:

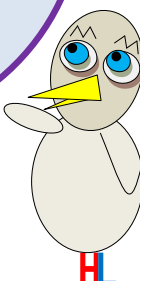
- Aggressive behaviours particularly during playtimes
- Attention seeking behaviours
- Complaints that they are bullied or bullying
- Complaints that they don't play fairly in games and visa versa.
- Frequent emotional outbursts
- Non-compliance
- Parental concerns that their child is not happy in school
- School Phobia - not wanting to come to school
- Withdrawn and often on their own

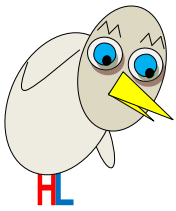
'Circle of Friends' is an intervention that can be effective in helping to tackle these behaviours. It can be used for children who struggle with friendships as well as those with more complex behaviour, emotional and social needs and/or autistic spectrum.

'Circle of Friends' can only take place with the permission of the focus child and their parents. The focus child needs to be able to recognise a need for change and acknowledge their own role in this.

It then requires the voluntary participation by a group of the focus child's peers to meet weekly to discuss issues and agree targets and strategies to help. The focus child needs to agree to this. Weekly progress is shared with the whole class and there is a celebration following the final meeting.

Before starting a 'Circle of Friends', there needs to be a commitment from the school to provide the time and resources to complete the intervention. This can be acknowledged in the school provision mapping and any behaviour plan.





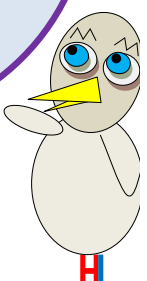
## Agreeing on and setting up

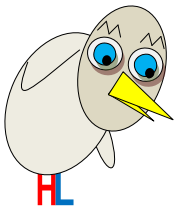
It is likely that meetings between the focus child's parents and the school are already taking place. If possible a discussion about the 'Circle of Friends' approach can be included in one of these already scheduled meetings otherwise a separate meeting will be necessary.

During the parent meeting it will be useful to have an open discussion of the child's needs before offering the 'Circle of Friends' approach as a suitable way of meeting them. It will be important to outline the whole approach and address any concerns parents may have about it.

If the child has any formal diagnosis it is essential that parents are asked about the extent to which their child is aware of this and also how much is known within the school community. Some parents may be very open about a diagnosis and happy for this to be shared. Others will wish to keep this private and this should be respected. Either way it should be made clear that the 'Circle of Friends' approach is based on an open sharing of issues through class discussion.

Depending on the maturity of the child and the nature of their difficulties it may or may not be appropriate to include them for part of the parent meeting. Whether the child is spoken to about the 'Circle of Friends' in the parent meeting or not, it is essential to get the child's willing cooperation. Care should be taken to explain using appropriate language and provide opportunities for the child to identify and express their own difficulties and wishes. The benefits of the 'Circle of Friends' should not be overstated, but equally it is important to address any worries that the child may have to gain agreement.





## The Class Meeting

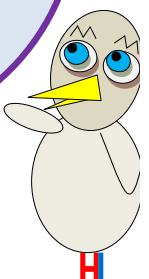
With the agreement of the focus child and their parents a meeting is set up including all members of the class or form. This meeting is led by the class teacher/form tutor and the member of staff who will facilitate the 'Circle of Friends' during the term. The focus child is not present at this meeting which generally last 45-60 minutes. The difficulties experienced by the focus child will be explored through an open discussion and at the end volunteers will be asked to commit to being part of the 'Circle of Friends'.

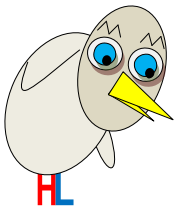
The class meeting is a critical phase in the setting up of the 'Circle of Friends' and requires careful planning and handling. It is important to set appropriate ground rules and depending on the age and experience of the children it may be necessary to explicitly detail how they should behave and make contributions in the meeting. Pupils experienced in 'Circle Time' will have practiced these social skills and if this has been part of the class's experience then it can be drawn upon.

The meeting should have an agenda and include:

- Introduction and purpose of meeting
- Ground rules
- Celebrating the positives about the focus child
- Exploring the difficulties about the focus child
- How the 'Circle of Friends' will work and the role of the volunteers
- Opportunity to volunteer
- Closure and reminder about confidentiality

It is important that everyone in the class gets an opportunity to voice their concerns and feel that they are taken seriously by the adult. This can be highly effective in reducing tensions that have built up. It is also important that the adult remains neutral and does not side with the class against the





## Volunteers for the 'Circle of Friends'

It is essential that the children are not inhibited or influenced by each other in deciding whether to volunteer. It is therefore best practice if everyone in the class writes their name on a small piece of paper with a simple YES or NO. These can be collected and then dealt with after the end of the class meeting.

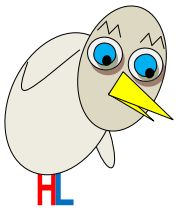
There is generally a good response to the request for volunteers and the class teacher/form tutor will need to select a group of about 6-8 to be part of the 'Circle of Friends'. It is important to make the group representative of the class or form and balance more able and influential pupils with one or two that may have some friendship difficulties of their own. Consider also the gender and racial balance of the group.

When the 'Circle of Friends' has been selected it is important to get the permission of their parents. This can be best achieved through a standard letter informing them that their child has volunteered to be part of the 'Circle of Friends' and include a copy of the parent leaflet. The standard letter should include a contact name for any queries that they may have. To reduce delays caused by parents not returning reply slips it is useful to assume permission unless parents actively opt out. The following sentences can be useful in your letter:

*Your child has agreed to the part of the 'Circle of Friends'. We are very grateful that they have volunteered to become involved and we hope that you will be happy with their participation. If you have any objections please could you notify \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.*

Those volunteers that are not selected should receive appropriate thanks and can be held in reserve should any of the selected become unavailable. Those selected should commit to the whole process but have a right to withdraw for any reason.





## Initial and weekly meetings

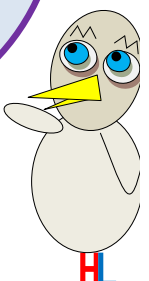
The 'Circle of Friends', the focus child and the facilitator meet each week for about 20-30 minutes. This is often done during a break-time. Issues are discussed and ways of supporting the focus child achieve targets are agreed.

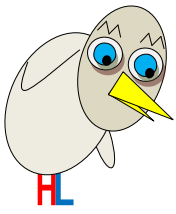
A meeting place away from the view of others should be chosen where there will be no interruptions. Meetings should start promptly and with sufficient time to go through the agenda. Ground rules need to be established at the first meeting and a reminder of these should be given at subsequent meetings.

Minutes are recorded for each meeting and these are shared with the whole class or form by a member of the circle. However, the meeting should be treated as confidential and therefore the minutes should only record general points discussed and any agreed actions. They should not identify individuals within the circle either directly by name or indirectly through any role that they have. Everyone attending the circle should be reminded at each meeting about not discussing what is said outside of the circle. Though the role of minute taker can be assigned to members of the circle it is useful for the facilitator to use a flip chart or other visual aid to record key points and ideas as the contributions are made. Recording using mind maps and diagrams can be a particularly powerful way of representing and organising information.

Assign roles of responsibility such as chairperson, minute taker and person who will provide feedback to the whole class or form. These roles are then revolved around the circle at each meeting. Obviously, younger children may need a lot of support with this and recording may not be possible for some children.

The class teacher or form tutor will need to timetable a few minutes each





## Initial and weekly meetings

week when a member of the 'Circle of Friends' reports back on their progress. The minutes recorded from the meeting should be used to support this.

Suggested agenda for initial meeting:

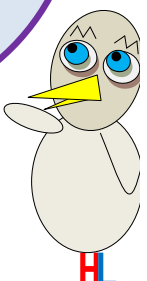
- Introductions
- Ground Rules
- Restate aims
- Volunteers to give reason for wanting to join group
- Group to list positives from class meeting
- Group to list behaviours that focus child needs to work on
- Target setting
- Agree a name for the circle
- Arrange time for next meeting

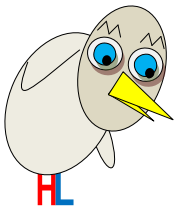
Participants are likely to feel a little awkward and anxious at the start of the first meeting and the facilitator needs to acknowledge and diffuse this.

Suggested agenda for subsequent meetings:

- Restate aims and ground rules
- Share good news about focus child
- Share bad news about focus child
- Review and set targets
- Arrange time for next meeting

A 'Circle of Friends' is usually run for 6-8 weeks with a meeting held each week. It is important to ensure that the meeting takes place and having a regular time slot can help members manage their other commitments. Care should also be taken to plan around any special events in school.



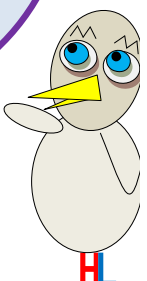


## Facilitator's role

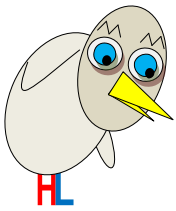
The facilitator's role is to help with the organisation of the meeting and to provide guidance to the group. They should encourage open and frank exploration of issues but intervene if a topic becomes too challenging for any of the participants. Some specific teaching of social problem solving skills may be necessary. For example, developing the assertiveness to give constructive criticism whilst trying to stay positive and maintain relationships requires a complex set of skills and attributes which will need to be modelled and explicitly taught.

It can be difficult for the focus child to cope with comments describing their challenging behaviour and they can become angry or upset. Occasionally this may result in the focus child directing their anger at one or more members of the circle. It is important that the facilitator reassures and comforts the circle members and help them to manage their own emotions in response to the hurtful remarks and situation. At times, it may therefore be necessary for the facilitator to re-take control of the meeting in order to diffuse negative situations and to reaffirm the purpose of the 'Circle of Friends' and the roles of its participants.

The facilitator also has a role in maintaining the motivation of the participants by ensuring that each member gets adequate recognition and encouragement for their contributions and efforts both inside the meetings and in support of the targets during the week. The motivation of the group will waver when targets are not achieved and the facilitator will need to assist the group to set realistic and achievable goals. Sometimes circles can set very challenging targets (and have been able to achieve them). If this happens, explore with the circle how their target will be achieved, who else will need to be involved and how they gain their agreement and cooperation.







## Final meeting and evaluation

The purpose of the final meeting is to evaluate progress made through the 'Circle of Friends' and decide on future actions. There is normally a celebration involving the whole class or form following this meeting.

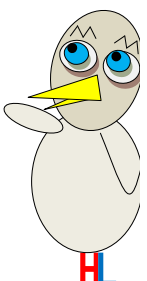
Hopefully, there will be some successes that can be celebrated and this will be more likely if targets have been SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). Where difficulties remain this should be acknowledged in the meeting and will form the basis of a discussion around what future actions and support are required.

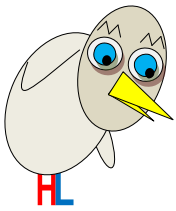
A suggested agenda might be:

- Restate aims and ground rules
- Briefly review targets set previous week
- Share and list positive progress, targets achieved since start of 'Circle of Friends'
- Share and list the concerns or difficulties that remain
- Agree statements evaluating the overall success (or failure) of the 'Circle of Friends'.
- Brainstorm possible further actions

There should be an opportunity to celebrate with the whole class or form achievement as a result of the 'Circle of Friends' and other interventions that may be concurrent. Ideally, this should happen the same week as the last meeting and will need to be planned, agreed and organised with the class teacher or form tutor. Any celebration will need to be proportional to the amount of progress made by the focus child.

In evaluating the overall progress made by the focus child it is important to look beyond the 'Circle of Friends' to include evidence from other school





## Final meeting and evaluation

sources. This may include behaviour logs, academic progress and more subjectively, changes in the difficulties experienced with the focus child perceived by staff or peers. Even when challenging behaviours continue the focus child may still be benefitting psychologically from the collective care that this approach brings and any improvement in attitudes towards their behaviour and the support they receive should be acknowledged.

After reviewing and summarising progress and achievement during the period of the 'Circle of Friends' it is necessary to consider what further steps need to be taken. This will depend not only on the level of success achieved during the 6-8 weeks of the circle but a realistic understanding of the nature of the focus child's original behaviours and any underlying causes and how embedded behaviours are. For some children no further action other than monitoring may be necessary. For others it may be appropriate to consider other interventions or to extend the 'Circle of Friends' approach.

Sometimes it will be appropriate to repeat the 'Circle of Friends' with a new circle of volunteers.

Following the final meeting it would be good practice to have a meeting with the focus child's parents or guardians to discuss progress and any further actions considered necessary.

