The Open University

Growing up with Disability

Circles of Support

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To set up a circle, normally I get a referral; often it's from the school themselves. I then contact the parent and the child to ensure that they are happy for it to go ahead. Obviously if the child doesn't want to be involved in it then it just doesn't proceed. Then generally I do a full class meeting to get volunteers for the circle, normally between 6 and 8 people from within the focus child's class. Then I get permission from their parents for them to be involved because in Primary Schools the children are taken out of class to participate in it. Then we meet once a week for between 20 and 30 minutes and we do activities, play games. Things to try and encourage the children to get to know each other a bit

All the children benefit from it. The focus child themselves gets the opportunity to socialize where perhaps their disability would have prevented them from having that opportunity. The other children get to know the focused child better and perhaps get to know the issues that they face and just generally by sharing positive experiences and having good fun together. It's to try to create a sort of natural friendship bond that they wouldn't ordinarily have and from that they will support the child within the school, you know, they'll maybe play with them at lunchtime whereas in the past they might have shunned them. Or they'll encourage them to be part of their groups at intervals and just generally to try and increase friendship bonds and just give them opportunities to socialize

The children were very supportive within the Primary School they all met regularly, they got to know Phoenix better and Phoenix obviously got to know them better. So continuing this during the holidays, it's a way to give them the opportunity to keep in touch. So they get 7 weeks summer holidays and it's a long time in the life of a child and if Phoenix doesn't get the opportunity to see any of these children then this is one way of letting her do so, so that she can keep in touch with them and once they go to the high school and they can continue it there and continue supporting her for her time there.

I think the important thing that I found when setting up circles is that you have to be flexible. A circle can be anything it needs to be. Some circles that I have running, the focused child identified to the other children – that's particularly in High School where they're at a really sensitive age and they would be really uncomfortable that they thought that people would realize they had some special need that they needed a support group. So some circles can be purely social groups. They can be set up as social skills groups for the whole group that's involved. Some circles are based round a common activity like a craft group or a music group and getting volunteers for all these groups depending on the type of group, it can be an open invitation to a year group. Children can be identified by the school staff. One group that's running involves a High School boy and the rest of the group are all children who have a particular vulnerability that has been identified by the High School and they were suggested for the group and its been successful because they're all supporting each other. They've all got a vulnerability and rather than having children who are the most popular in the class, the most confident in the class, who would never be a natural friend to some of these children, they're all supporting themselves and true friendships have developed from it rather than responsibilities. They've actually gone beyond responsibilities into something much nicer. Children are marvellous support for each other. They just need to have the power to do so, to be enabled to support each other.

I think Circles of Support are a very good idea. The fact that more and more children are being integrated quite rightly into main-stream schools, it gives everybody the benefits of getting to know everybody better in a safe, comfortable environment.