

CIRCLE of FRIENDS & The CIRCLE of FRIENDS PROCESS

We all need friends. We can scarcely envision life without loved ones and good friends about us. It is an unfortunate reality that some young people experiencing disabilities do not have a rich circle of friends, or even of acquaintances. Their situation, the impact of their challenges, their frequent placement in segregated educational settings, and low expectations for progress lead many students to being lonely even among hordes of people.

Teachers, parents, and typical peers can change this situation for those without a naturally formed circle of friends. It is simple to do so. Circle of Friends does not help only one person. It helps those who join the Circle. It helps the adults involved in making a Circle happen. The Circle of Friends strategy contributes from the first years of school to the end of school and beyond through creation of a culture of acceptance, respect and positive action in an entire school.

Circle of Friends is a proven support strategy used internationally by schools and community organizations. Many Canadian and United States schools use the Circle of Friends strategy, as do many schools in other nations.

Circle of Friends begins with a review of the social life of an individual. This social scan takes shape as 4 concentric circles in which names are recorded and social closeness indicated. These are:

Circle of Friends

- **Innermost (First) Circle – Circle of Intimacy**

The names recorded here are those closest to the person at the centre of the circle. Those with intimate interaction. These are the people one cannot think of life without.

- **Second Circle – Circle of Friendship**

These are the person's best friends. They would almost make it into the Circle of Intimacy.

- **Third Circle – Circle of Participation**

These are persons associated through participation in community organizations. They can be schoolmates, teachers, people from church, temple, or synagogue, from a club, a dance group, a team, or any 'association' where one joins and meets people.

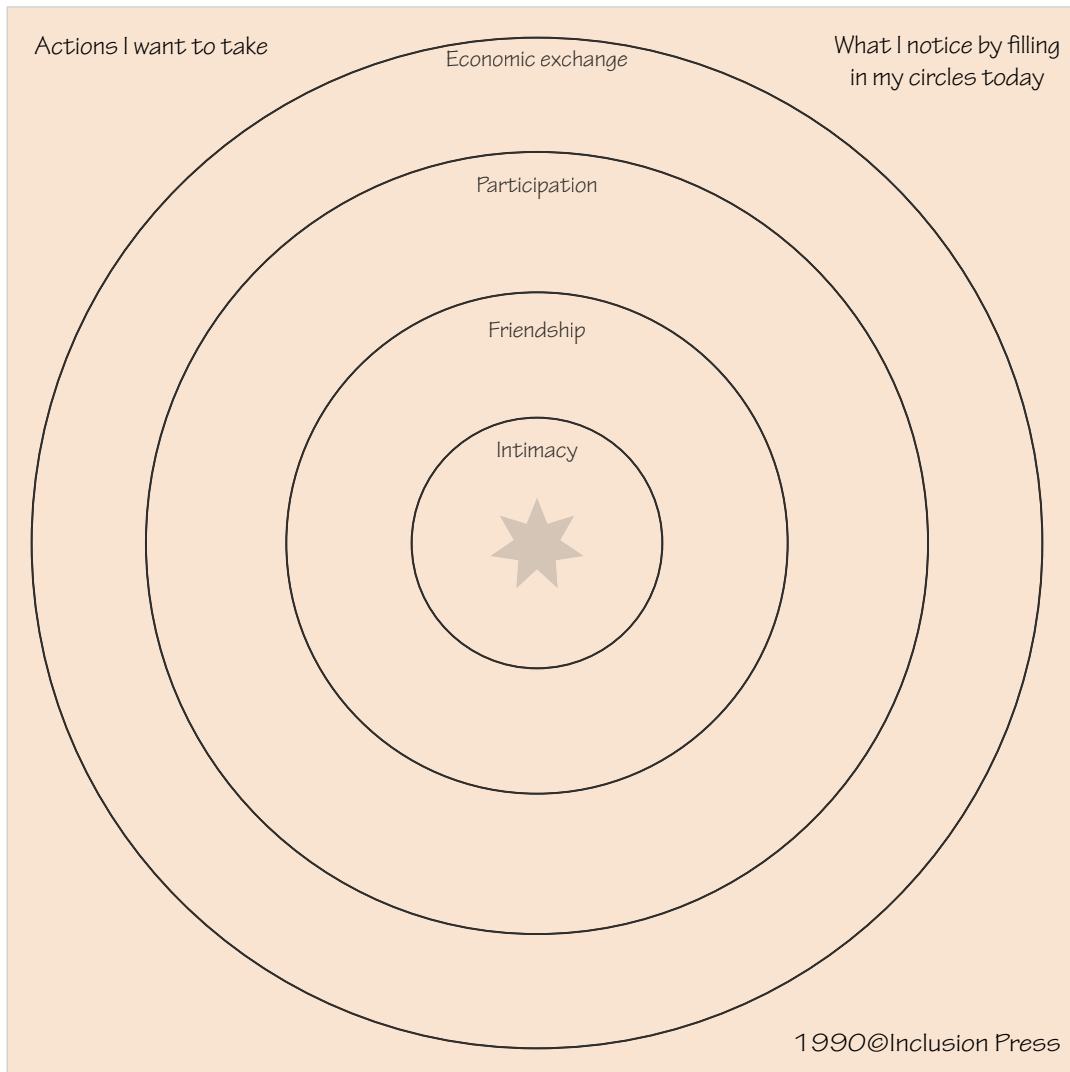
- **Outermost (Fourth) Circle – Circle of Exchange**

These are people paid to be in the individual's life. Medical professionals, teachers, caregivers, and so on.

Notes:

- Some people may be in more than one circle. For example, a teacher is paid to be in a student's life, but also may become a friend.

- To be in a circle, one does not even need be human, as with a favoured pet; or alive, as with a favourite relative who has passed.



The Process

The process is simple, but can become quite emotional. A facilitator draws the four circles on a large surface. A group of supporters form a participating audience. These may include any appropriate group – beginning with peers, and then teachers, educational assistants, school administrators, parents, other family and friends. The name of the person at the centre of the process goes into the middle of the Circle of Intimacy.

The setting should be 'hospitable' and welcoming. The Facilitator

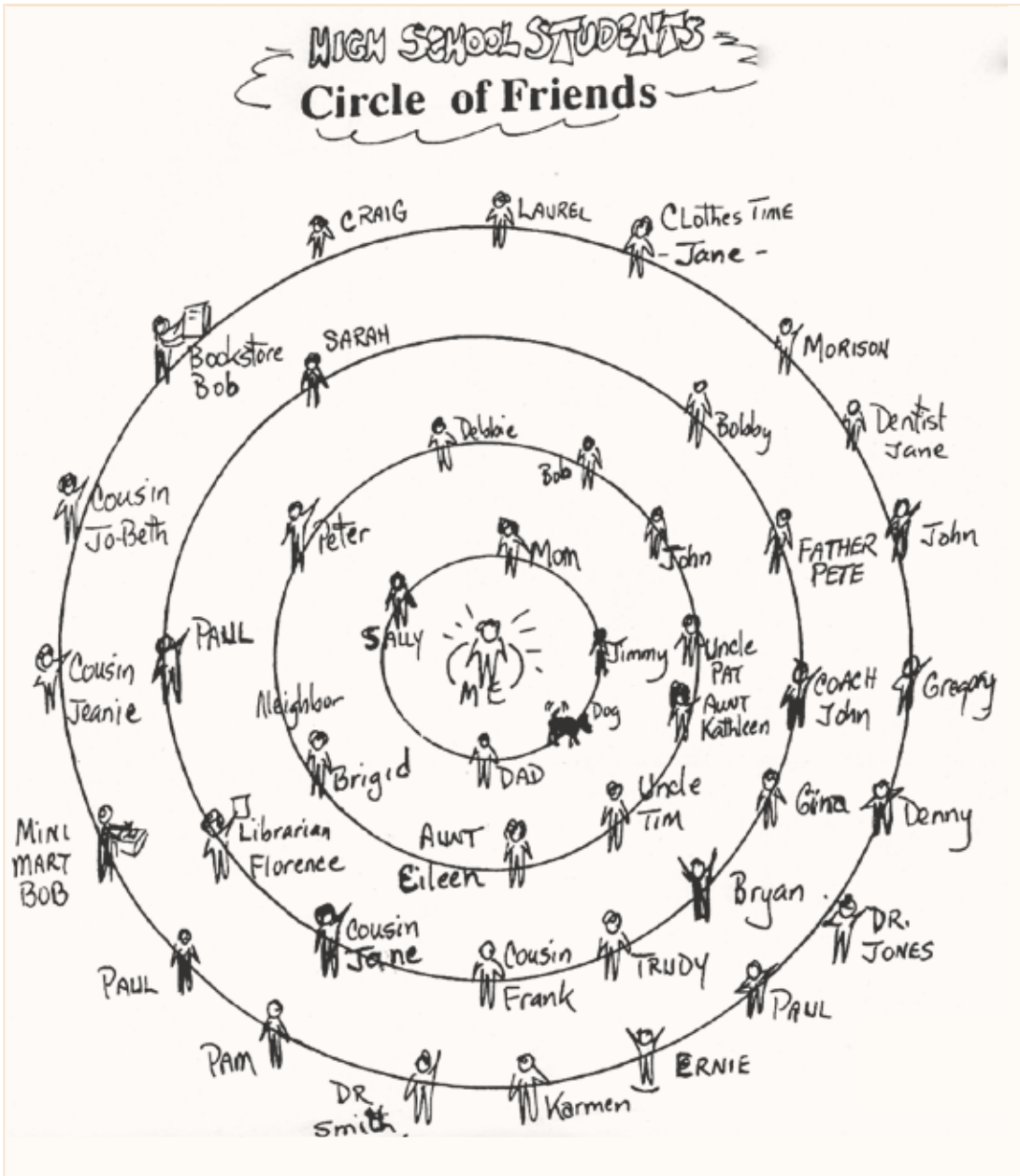
begins by explaining that this process is voluntary and creates a 'picture' of the people in a person's life. The purpose of the process is to notice potential for strengthening relationships and friendships.

The first step is to create a Circle of Friends diagram for a volunteer 'typical' student. This demonstrates the process, and typically reveals the kind of friendship circle that one might expect around most people. It also gives everyone involved a rehearsal for participating in the Circle of Friends process for the person experiencing disability.

The facilitator, pointing to the Circle of Intimacy, says, "Only the people most important in your life go here. Who fits in here? Who is very, very close to you? Who do you want in your life forever?" The person at the centre of the process decides whose names go into the Circle of Intimacy. If the person has some type of communication challenge, another person may assist, but every effort is made to have the centre individual make the decisions in her or his own way. The names of the people chosen are written into the circle.

The facilitator then goes through the same process for each circle, always explaining the purpose of the circle and always recording names. Once the Circle for the typical student is completed, discussion is held on how each of the circles includes a variety of names. Attention is drawn to what people are present in each circle. The people are in different circles because they have different relationships with the person at the centre.

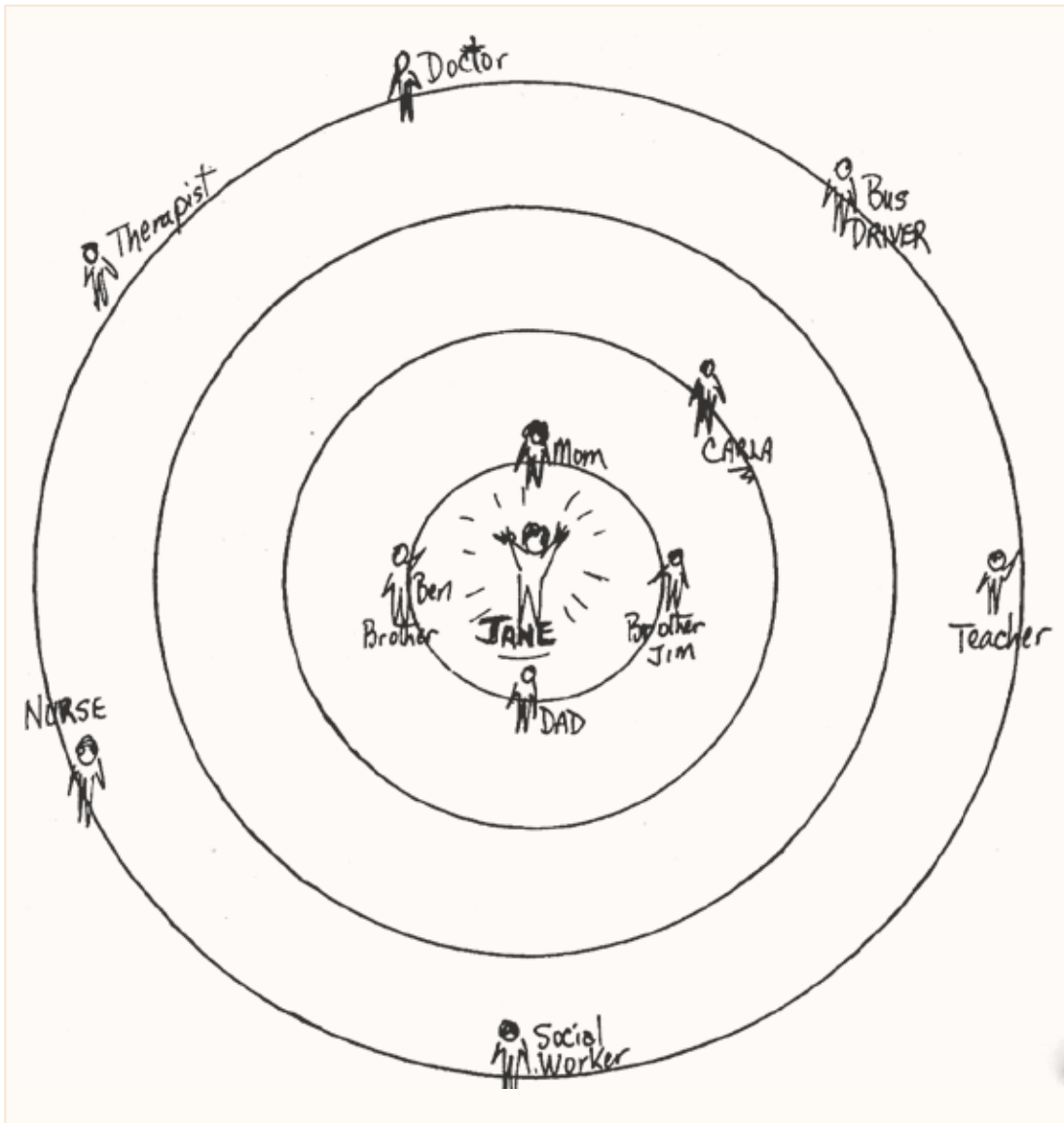
Even students with strong Circles of Friendship often feel elated as they actually see the enormous array of people in their lives.



Above is a 'typical' complete sample circle of friends diagram.

Now, go through the same process for the person experiencing disability.

Quoted from: All My Life's a Circle: Inclusion Press with permission.



The most common result is that there is immediate and often dramatic awareness of differences between the two circles. Discussion makes the differences more apparent. One has many more names than the other. Frequently, the names of people normally listed on the Circle of Exchange (paid to be in your life) appear on the internal circles of the person with challenges. This could be because some are actual friends. It could also be because there are so few people named in the three inner circles.



The circle diagrams above make it clear that the content is much more important than the 'art'. Sticky notes provide a way for more people to be involved in 'posting' suggestions to the network. Being interactive is good.

The final step is discussion with the group of what the differences suggest, and what might be done to strengthen the friendship circle around the person at the centre of the process. In schools, the group includes classmates as well as some family members and school staff. Very often, and particularly in earlier grades, the students immediately volunteer to support their peer experiencing disability. Sometimes the group, especially when older, needs to be led toward suggesting how to strengthen the circle so that volunteers come forward.