

# The Circles Concept: Social Competence in Special Education

*A simple floor mat of circles can help intellectually impaired students distinguish "blue hug" intimate friends from "yellow handshake" and "orange wave" acquaintances.*

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Those of us in special education are often poignantly reminded that many of our students fail to

integrate with normal students because of their lack of social/sexual competence. Some special education students

misuse their sexuality to achieve popularity or flaunt sex-related language to gain attention. Some become objects of ridicule because of their naiveté in social/sexual matters.

To help these students categorize their real-life relationships, we devised the Circles concept (see fig. 1 below): six color-coded concentric circles are reproduced upon a life-sized floor mat to clearly define various levels of intimacy as we role-play social relationships.

We assigned each level of intimacy a space on the mat, and each level a color.

FIGURE 1

## THE CIRCLE OF RELATIONSHIPS

### 1 PURPLE PRIVATE CIRCLE

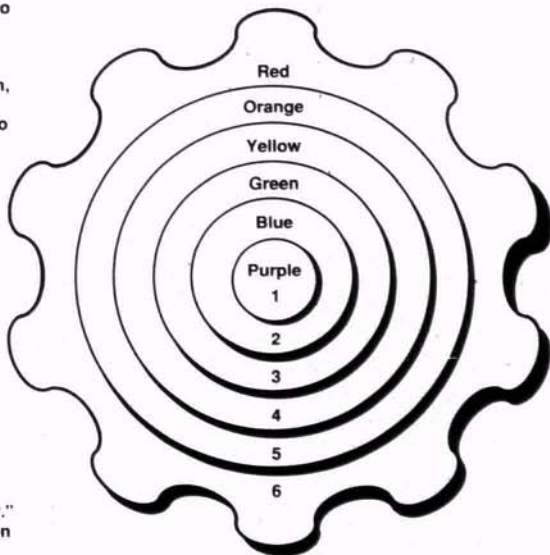
- You are important, and you decide who will touch you.
- No one should touch you unless you want to be touched.
- Sometimes people in your Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, or Red CIRCLES will try to get too close to you. You need to say "STOP."
- No one touches you unless you want to be touched, and you do not touch other people unless they want to be touched.

### 2 BLUE HUG CIRCLE

- It is a mutual decision to kiss and be close. If you do not want to, you must say "STOP."
- Sometimes you may not feel like being touched. This does not mean you are no longer close with your partner, but only not feeling loving at that moment.
- Your partner can "STOP" you, too.

### 3 GREEN FARAWAY CIRCLE

- Sometimes a friend may want to be closer to you than you want. You just explain to your friend and say, "STOP."
- I will give you a "Faraway" hug only on special occasions.
- You are not in my Blue Hug Circle.



### 4 YELLOW HANDSHAKE CIRCLE

- Sometimes someone whose name you know may ask for a "Faraway" hug. You can say "No."
- No one can touch you unless you want to be touched.

### 5 ORANGE WAVE CIRCLE

- Wave to an acquaintance who is too far away for a handshake.
- Sometimes children will want to hug and kiss you, but you can say "No."
- It is best to wave to children.
- Children do not know as much as you, and so you have to show them correct behavior.

### 6 RED STRANGER CIRCLE

- Some people stay strangers forever.
- You may talk about business to a stranger who is a community helper.
- Other strangers do not talk to you or touch you.

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a name, an iconic sign, and a specific behavior that characterizes that degree of intimacy. We also use audiovisual story examples to illustrate application of these principles of social order and let students observe others using the concepts of the Circles in natural settings.

Each student creates a smaller set of personalized Circles using markers, photos, drawings, and written names, depending upon student abilities. As facilitators, we help students understand the concept of mutuality by teaching them that in order for a person to be listed in a particular circle, that person must agree to be there. Students begin to develop an understanding of the concepts of friendship, dating, sexual love, self-protection, assertiveness, biological information, and even the maturation process in a social context.

### The World of Circles

Each student is represented by the center circle in the design. This circle, called the private purple circle, is small, with room for only one person in it, the most important person, YOU! *You, the student, will decide who will be close to you and who will populate your other circles, based upon the social rules of mutuality.*

When we use the role-play floor mat, students take turns standing in the purple private circle and telling the class why they are the most important person in their own world of circles. Some students say, "I'm important because I like myself." Others say "I'm important because I'm black!" or "I'm important because I AM!" We encourage the rest of the class to support these statements.

Around the small center circle is another one, color-coded blue and named the blue hug circle. There is not much room within that blue hug circle; and, in fact, there are not very many people with whom students have a relationship with such closeness that hugging body to body would be a mutually desired contact.

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The teacher helps the students recognize that the people in the blue hug circle are the people they love and who return their love. These people are typically members of the nuclear family; but they may also be step-parents, grandparents, and significant others with whom students have this degree of mutual intimacy. For older students, a sweetheart might fit into this relationship circle. We help these students distinguish sexual love from familial love and encourage them to people this circle in such a way as to reflect their real-life relationships. When students have no loving relationships, teachers cannot fill this void. We can, however, provide hope for the future and reassurance to students that they are lovable.

Surrounding the blue hug circle is the green faraway friendly hug circle. It can include more people, mostly close friends and extended family with whom students have emotional ties and a history. A casual hug or a pat on the back exemplifies this relationship. Most students have a good time listing all of their different friends and extended family members; they usually view having a full green circle with a delightful sense of accomplishment. A full green circle can be a tremendous source of self-esteem. When students want to include teachers in this circle, we sometimes find ourselves negotiating whether or not we want to be designated as this friendly with any or all of our students. As students develop these circles, we often devote an entire unit to the meaning of friendship.

The fourth circle is the yellow handshake circle. It designates the comfort zone for people whose names students know, but who are not their friends. Only hand-to-hand contact is required to establish this level of social distance. A handshake is comfortable to adults, but children often rename this circle the yellow "high five" circle and slap each others' hands above their heads. Either way, the distance and the relationship remain the same, and the hands remain the only physical contact that occurs. Everyone in the classroom is at least in this circle of closeness, so all classmates can experience feelings of inclusion when we role-play in this circle.

The next circle, the orange wave circle, contains acquaintances who have familiar faces. People whom students recognize but who are physically too distant or too busy at the moment to shake hands are part of this category. When the students learn about this circle, they also learn to observe when a person should not be disturbed and to recognize when they themselves are too busy to be distracted to shake hands.

We teach teenagers that little children should be in the orange wave circle. It is best for them to wave to children to avoid the possibility that outside observers might misinterpret touching exchanged between a child and a teenager. Learning this concept helps teens to prepare for adulthood—they practice age guessing, learn to distinguish children from adults, and recognize where they belong on that age/time continuum.

Surrounding all of these circles is the red stranger space. It purposefully has wavy lines to indicate that strangers are continually coming into and moving out of the periphery of our lives. This space is very large; most people are strangers and will remain so. There is usually no need to talk to or touch a stranger, unless that person is acting in the role of a community helper. Uniforms, hats, and badges can be clues to students to recognize community helpers, although some community

helpers do not wear them. Sometimes students have to talk to or touch people who are strangers but only if it is part of their business with that community helper. Most students already know the rule "Don't talk to strangers!" and they find it amusing that they may be permitted to talk to community helpers (indeed strangers) about business.

### A World of Success

We have enjoyed great success using this simple design with our students. They feel better about their rights to be in control of their bodies and relationships, and they are better prepared to leave school and contribute more productively to their communities. And we feel better, knowing that we've helped

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our students achieve the satisfaction that comes from positive mutual relationships. □

*Authors' note:* The *Circles* program is available from the Stanfield Publishing Company, P.O. Box 41058, Santa Barbara, CA 93140; 1-800-421-6534. Other *Circles* programs available from Stanfield Publishing include:

*Circles: Stop Abuse.* This three-part audiovisual program that focuses on preventing sexual abuse. The program presents positive role models and support activities to help people with intellectual impairments learn to recognize the early stages of encroachments on personal space by others.

*Circles: Safer Ways.* This multimedia curriculum teaches AIDS prevention. Positive role models help developmentally disabled people with intellectual disabilities learn how to maintain health and minimize risk of exposure to communicable diseases.

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### Resources for Sexuality Education of Students With Intellectual Impairments

The Coalition on Sexuality and Disability is an all-volunteer, not-for-profit organization committed to the advancement of full social integration of people with disabilities through educational programs, advocacy work, and as a resource information clearinghouse. Individual membership: \$25; organizational membership: \$50. Membership includes a quarterly newsletter and a discount on the journal *Sexuality and Disability*. Write to: The Coalition on Sexuality and Disability, 122 East 23rd St., New York, NY 10010; 212-242-3900.

James Stanfield and Company specializes in high-quality audiovisual teaching materials for teaching socialization and sexuality skills to people with intellectual disabilities. For a catalog write James Stanfield and

Company, P.O. Box 41058, Santa Barbara, CA 93140; or call 1-800-421-6534.

*Life Horizons, Part I and Part II.* (James Stanfield and Company, 1989) is a slide curriculum and guide. It is the most recent expanded edition of the earlier *Sexuality and the Mentally Handicapped* curriculum by Winifred Kempton. Part I focuses on physiological and emotional aspects of sexuality; Part II focuses on the moral, social, and legal aspects of sexuality.

*Changing Inappropriate Sexual Behavior* by Dorothy M. Griffiths, Vernon L. Quinsey, and David Hingsburger (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 1989), is a clear and jargon-free resource for gaining insights into sexual behaviors that might cause

difficulties in community life for people with developmental disabilities. It provides some practical approaches for helping to manage these behaviors.

Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). SIECUS is a clearinghouse for information on sexuality. Members can use their resource library by calling 212-673-3850. Write to: 32 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003.

American Association on Mental Retardation has just initiated a special interest group on social and sexual concerns. For more information contact: AAMR, 1719 Kalorama Road, N.W., Washington, DC 20009; 1-800-424-3688.

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