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Circles[®]

Intimacy & Relationships Curriculum



RESEARCH REPORT | FEBRUARY 2016

CIRCLES APP™: NEW APP BASED ON PROVEN EFFECTIVE CIRCLES® CURRICULUM

*Proven Effective by Harvard University, the Curriculum Teaches
Social Boundaries and Protects Against Abuse and Exploitation*



Harvard University Finds Circles® Curriculum Proven Effective

Curriculum Teaches Social Boundaries and Protects Against Abuse and Exploitation

INTRODUCTION:

Organizing social connections based on a person's objective "closeness" is something that comes naturally to most. We categorize individuals and, based on previous interactions/connections, we decide how to act towards them: these decisions include how to talk to someone and what we talk about, how much we can trust them, and how much touch and what types of touch are appropriate with them.

However, children on the autism spectrum, children with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and children with affective disorders have greater difficulties understanding these appropriate social boundaries, and how to categorize relationships. This difficulty inhibits children from creating healthy social relationships.

Unfortunately, lacking an understanding of appropriate social boundaries also makes these students more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. That's where Circles® comes in. Circles® was developed to provide these children with the tools to organize relationships and determine what levels of touch, talk, and trust are appropriate.

With Circles®, students learn:

- **Social distance:** students learn social distance when they can "see" social boundaries
- **Relationship building:** learn that intimacy levels change as relationships change, and learn which changes are inappropriate vs. appropriate
- **Intimacy level signs:** students can recognize degrees of variation that indicate relationship rules and recognize signs that a relationship is changing
- **Rejecting intimacy:** if a relationship change is not mutual, students learn to reject intimacy and develop

strategies for social success and self-protection when intimacy is rejected

- **Recognize & react to exploitation:** Learn appropriate protective behaviors

School-based programs like Circles® can help students learn the rules of intimacy and social boundaries. Circles® VideoModeling Curriculum teaches social and relationship boundaries and relationship-specific social skills, using a simple multi-layer circle diagram to demonstrate the different relationship levels students will encounter in daily life. Circles® is a concrete, organizational paradigm for students with special educational needs that helps them learn to act and interact in self-enhancing ways.

"I strongly believe that participating in this program helped a student of mine report that she was being sexually abused by a member of her family. I have taught over 20 years and this is one of the best programs for my students."

—Jeri Chronister, Teacher

Circles® is used in over 10,000 facilities across the U.S to help students recognize exploitative relationships—as well as develop mutually respectful ones. The curriculum's strong content validity has been noted by many experts in the field who have evaluated the Circles® curriculum using their professional judgment and have endorsed Circles® as an effective vehicle for teaching social boundaries and personal safety (examples below).

But does a school-based program, like Circles®, actually work in teaching healthy social relationships to children with disabilities?

Yes! In a Harvard University study, the Circles® curriculum was proven effective in "increasing knowledge of social safety and appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviors for children with developmental disabilities."¹

BACKGROUND:

Armed with the knowledge that children with developmental disabilities are “at higher risk for physical and sexual abuse, often by someone they know,” researchers at Harvard University set out to prove whether the Circles® curriculum is effective in teaching appropriate social boundaries to prevent abuse and exploitations, and to encourage healthy relationships.

With the goal of increasing child knowledge of social safety and appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviors, Harvard University chose the Circles® curriculum to test its ability to help children categorize real life relationships, establish social boundaries, and understand appropriate levels of intimacy. “Although many health professionals have endorsed the Circles® curriculum,” the study states, “evidence of its feasibility and effectiveness had not been established.”¹

OBJECTIVE:

The Harvard study, presented at a conference for Developmental/Behavioral Pediatrics, was conducted with these two objectives in mind:

1. To increase child knowledge of social safety and appropriate vs. inappropriate social behaviors¹
2. To determine feasibility of conducting a school-based curriculum for children with developmental disabilities¹

METHOD:

The Circles® Curriculum utilizes the following teaching and pedagogical strategies. These are considered to be best practices in Special Education, and they have been well documented in learning literature that prepares teachers for teaching Special Education students with unique learning styles:

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| 1. Role modeling | 9. Role-playing practice |
| 2. Color-coding | 10. Opportunities to generalize into real life |
| 3. Pairing | 11. Developmental model that addresses many levels of learning and caters to learning experience |
| 4. Expressive non-verbal communication | 12. Self-efficacy training |
| 5. Rehearsal strategies | 13. Non-language based instructional materials |
| 6. Repetition | 14. Multi modal learning opportunities |
| 7. Experiential activities | |
| 8. Group problem solving | |

In order to prove that these methods used in the Circles® Curriculum were indeed effective, Harvard researchers conducted a quasi-experimental study in a Boston public school.¹ Children with intellectual and developmental disorders between the ages of 14 and 21 were divided into two groups in a classroom-by-classroom basis.

During the first round, Group A immediately started the Circles® program, while Group B served as the control group. Both groups were tested on their ability to “recognize, resist, and report inappropriate touching.” Next, Group B completed the Circles® curriculum, and both groups were tested again.

From the study: “Students completed the vignette-based What-if Situations Test (WIST) and the true/false Children’s Knowledge of Abuse Questionnaire (CKAQ) to assess their ability to recognize, resist and report inappropriate touching.”¹

RESULTS

The Harvard study proved that the Circles® curriculum is effective in increasing both Group A and Group B's knowledge of social boundaries, social safety, and appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior:

From the study: "Both groups had improved WIST scores at each post-test point, though the change was significantly greater in their respective post-intervention periods. The curriculum was successfully adapted to the cognitive needs of the students and there was positive feedback from teachers and students.¹"

CONCLUSIONS:

The research conducted by Harvard University certifies Circles® as a proven effective program for teaching healthy relationships, social distance, social boundaries, and relationship safety, to children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.¹

The study concluded, "School-based curricula, such as Circles®, are effective in increasing knowledge of social safety and appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviors for children with developmental disabilities. Lessons learned from our experiences with the Circles® curriculum will help guide school districts in implementing programs for children with disabilities.¹"

The easy-to-learn and easy-to-teach organization of the Circles® Paradigm sets the curriculum apart as one of the strongest proven programs in teaching appropriate relationships and protecting students with intellectual and developmental disabilities from abuse and exploitation. Lauded as, "The Indispensable Video Program for Teaching Social Boundaries," Circles® has been endorsed by many experts in the field, and it's impact is well documented². The Government of Western Australia Public Health explains why Circles® is so indispensable:

"This video program helps students to recognize exploitative relationships as well as develop mutually respectful ones. Circles® presents to special students some extremely abstract concepts in a very simple and concrete manner. The connection between the kind of relationship and the corresponding level of intimacy is demonstrated visually, making it easy for students to understand this important concept.²"

OTHER EXAMPLES OF THE PROGRAM'S EFFECTIVENESS:

1. Included in the *State of Mass Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Disability Resource Guide 2013*. Circles® is described as follows: "The Circles® curriculum is a 6 weeklong session that teaches social distance and levels of Intimacy through the use of six color-coded concentric circles. It assists students to discriminate different degrees of intimacy and to adapt their behaviors accordingly. It also teaches students how relationships can be formed and maintained according to the social norms of our day."

2. *SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States)* includes Circles® in their *Sexuality and Disabilities Bibliography 2012*.

3. *Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc.* 2014 includes Circles® in their special education/disabilities page for teaching sexuality information.

4. *The British Columbia Council of Administrators of Special Education Functional Curriculum Resource Review* notes; "the Circles® program is designed to teach information which protects people from exploitation; often used as the principle resource for programming since other resources easily dovetail with this curriculum; best used with a group but may be used one to one."

5. *The Calgary Health Region* site <http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca> lists the Circles® curriculum in "Sexuality and Developmental Disability: A Guide For Parents"
 6. *Seattle/King County Dept of Public Health* in their "Family Life and Sexual Health, Special Education" resource list includes the Circles® Curriculum.
 7. *The University of Pennsylvania's* publication "When is it too young to talk about sex" includes Circles®: as a suggested resource.
 8. From *Monroe Public Schools Instructional Services Dept*: "These materials are designed to simultaneously teach/train students for greater social competence and independence. The materials are flexible and can be adapted to the needs of specific students and are appropriate for nonreaders and students who need concrete experiences to learn." Originally considered for one student's IEP,[it has been] adapted and available to all life-skills faculty.
 9. In an unpublished Master's thesis many years ago Circles®: STOP ABUSE was shown to raise assertiveness and increase student's awareness about encroachment in relationships. There have been countless individual stories from teachers and family members who report anecdotal evidence in a more informal way about the positive outcomes for their students and children who have learned Circles®.
 10. Circles® is used in variety of settings across the US, Canada and Australia, by schools, adult programs, offender rehabilitation programs, mental health services, work readiness programs and transition programs.
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¹*Using a School-Based Program To Teach Healthy Social Relationships To Children With Developmental Disabilities*; Sabrina Sargado, Noelle L. Huntington, Casey Walsh, Georgios D. Sideridis, Alison D. Schonwald. Division of Developmental Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA; Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA; University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX. 25 April 2015.

²References have been collected from various resources by James Stanfield, Ed.D and Garilynn Stanfield, PhD, LCSW

Circles®:

Circles® Level 1: Intimacy and Relationships. Marklyn P. Champagne, RN, MSW and Leslie Walker-Hirsch, MEd

Circles® Level 2: Intimacy and Relationships. James Stanfield, EdD

Circles® Stop Abuse: Avoid Exploitation. Marklyn P. Champagne, RN, MSW, Leslie Walker-Hirsch, MEd, James Stanfield, EdD