



### **Circle of Friends: Using the peer group to support social inclusion of ASD students.**

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One of the biggest issues of students with ASD in a mainstream high school setting is their ability to make and sustain genuine and meaningful relationships. Due to the number of behavioural complexities of a student with ASD they are more susceptible to increased levels of anxiety, social dysfunction, bullying and isolation which can lead to mental health issues and declining academic engagement. Similarly, peers may find the behaviour of the student with ASD unpredictable, rigid and impulsive. Most incidences of bullying and social exclusion occur away from teacher or adult supervision and often ASD students or neuro-typical students may not have the skills to navigate their way through such confronting and unpredictable social situations. Equally, teachers can also be at a loss as to how to manage the interaction between these two groups in a way that is positive, effective and productive.

Therefore, how can students with ASD be supported to engage more effectively and positively in social situations and interactions at school? What role can their peers play in assisting to bridge the gap with such social interactions and preventing incidences before they occur? How can teachers assist in this process? Peer-mediated programs such as the 'Circle of Friends' has the ability to alter the behaviour of both students with ASD and their peers in a mainstream high school setting. The aim of the Circle of Friends is to support the inclusion of students with ASD with their peer group by developing a support network of friendship around the student who may be isolated.

Newington College, a K-12 comprehensive boys' school located in the inner-west of Sydney, has implemented the Circle of Friends to support some students with ASD in Year 8. Led by the Head of Learning Enhancement, the Circle of Friends was developed in conjunction with a local psychologist who works with these students and who is specialised in the area of ASD in teenagers. The students with ASD, their parents, peers across all areas of the school and their teachers were all trained in better understanding the characteristics of ASD and the students being supported. This led to increased social engagement for both the student with ASD and their peers whilst simultaneously reducing incidences of bullying and social isolation. It is an initiative that is easy to implement, cost-effective and applicable to all school settings.