



Circle of Friends






The Path to Inclusion



Mission

*To promote inclusion for students with disabilities and those living with adversity.
To empower all students to appreciate differences, build genuine friendships,
and stand up to bullying.*

Core Values

-  *Honor Diversity while Celebrating our Commonality*
-  *Cultivate Friendship and Emotional Intelligence*
-  *Support Development of the Whole Child*
-  *Presume Competence and Resilience in Others*
-  *Build Advocacy through Empowerment*

What Is Circle of Friends?

Circle of Friends (CoF) is an inclusion program for students who experience social isolation. Starting with weekly lunches and meaningful activities, students of all abilities and backgrounds learn that they are more alike than different. Our program establishes a culture of acceptance through genuine friendships.

Circle of Friends is a sustainable, evidence-based program for elementary, middle, and high schools. Since 2005, Circle of Friends has launched over 245 chapters, positively impacting the lives of more than 90,000 students with and without disabilities.

How do schools implement this innovative program?

Experienced Program Facilitators partner with districts for **training and consultation**, including **virtual workshops**, a **comprehensive manual**, **specialized resources**, **site visits**, **phone and email support**. School-site Advisors and administrators can then tailor CoF for their school's unique needs.

CoF can also **develop internal trainers** to support and expand inclusion, **provide refresher trainings**, and **coordinate regional conferences**.

See CoF in action!

Elementary video: <https://youtu.be/vWKY87aIBp8>
Imperial County Office of Education video <https://youtu.be/-LbEqiWoZMg>

For more information, call 323-352-3019 or visit our website at www.CircleofFriends.org.



How does Circle of Friends improve School Culture and Climate?

Students have increasingly complex needs.

- 1 in 5 students in US public schools has a disability or learning difference. They spend 80% of the day in general education classrooms.¹
- 17.4% have a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.²
- Nearly half of school-age children in the US have experienced trauma, *or Adverse Childhood Experiences*. The most common ACEs: poverty and parent/guardian divorce or separation. By the time they start school, 21-37% of Latino and Black children have been impacted by multiple ACEs.³

Educators struggle to develop positive relationships with students.

- 83% of general education teachers report that credential programs and training has not prepared them to work with students with disabilities.⁴
- 23% say their most challenging task is, “finding ways to help students who appear to be in emotional or psychological distress.”⁵
- 78% believe that it is part of their job to help students develop social-emotional skills but don’t know how or when to do this.⁶





Children and youth are being negatively impacted.

- 33.1% of students reported being bullied in 2019, a 5% increase since 2016.⁷
- Students who experience bullying are at risk for poor school adjustment, sleep difficulties, anxiety and depression.⁸
- Students with disabilities are 2-3 times more likely to be bullied and to experience seclusion and restraints.⁹

Districts are losing students, teachers, and funding.

- Suspension increases the chance of dropping out from 16% to 32%.¹¹
- Each year, 8% of US teachers leave the classroom before retirement age due to dissatisfaction with compensation, support, and classroom conditions. Teacher turnover costs school districts upwards of \$2.2 billion a year.¹²
- When students miss school to avoid being bullied it costs districts ADA funding. California loses an estimated \$276 million annually for safety-related absences.¹³

Schools need a program that:

-  *Addresses the **social-emotional needs** and **safety** of each student.*
-  *Provides **strategies and support** to help teachers connect with their students.*
-  *Inspires **compassion** and **self-advocacy** to create student-led change.*
-  *Improves **student engagement**, **teacher morale** and **school climate**.*



Circle of Friends Program Components



- CoF Program Facilitator meets with administrator to assess program needs and align CoF with current initiatives.
- Teachers and administrators receive Circle of Friends orientation, and 2-3 educators at each school site are identified as CoF Advisors. Advisor Teams receive additional training to implement our School Inclusion Program on their campuses.
- Advisors select and connect peers in general education classes to students who are socially isolated because of disability or other challenges.
- Through meaningful group activities, circles of 2-3 peers learn about their new friends and identify common interests.
- Students of all abilities commit to weekly lunches for the rest of the school year and develop genuine friendships.
- Advisors provide support as needed to the peer volunteers. These students develop 21st Century skills like emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and teamwork.
- Monthly participation in school events models and promotes awareness and acceptance for all students.
- As CoF grows, inclusive Student Leadership Teams help Advisors plan and manage the program, including activities outside of school, presentations on ability awareness, service projects and a year-end celebration.

Program Impact

- Educators feel more competent, develop positive relationships, and see potential in all students.
- Students who once felt invisible now look forward to school and Circle of Friends. Their social communication improves through regular practice with peers.
- School administrators report an improvement in school culture and a reduction in bullying.
- Participants increase their *Awareness, Acceptance, and Appreciation* of differences and become *Allies* and *Advocates* for their friends, themselves, and others.

*Circle of Friends promotes an inclusive culture
that welcomes and values all students.*



Circle of Friends

A Bullying Prevention Strategy

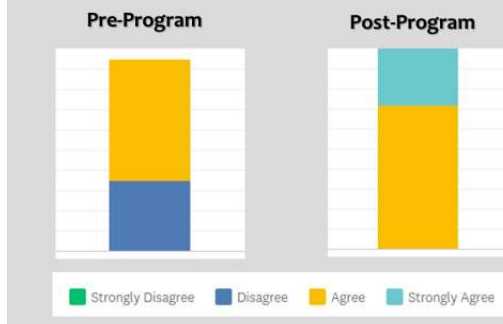


Bullying Affects Student Learning and Well-Being

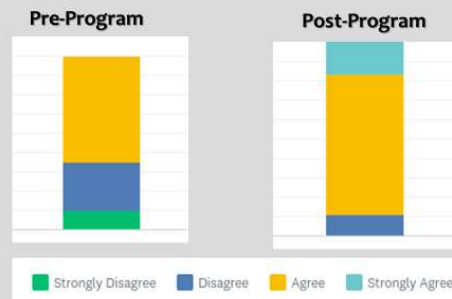
- 33.1% of students reported being bullied in 2019.⁷ Students with disabilities are 2-3 times more likely to experience bullying.⁹
- 57% percent of bullying stops when a peer intervenes.¹⁷
- Successful strategies to prevent bullying among students include:
 - Teachers engaging with students in meaningful, inclusive activities.
 - Opportunities for all students to increase social competence.¹⁷

2018-2019 CoF Program Survey, 19 schools reporting

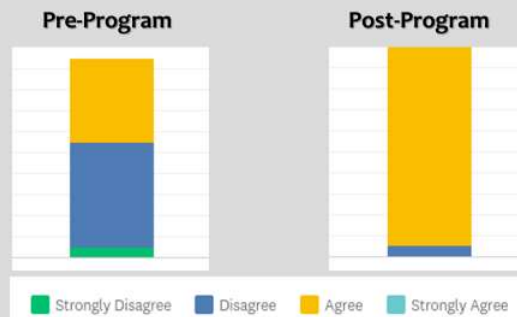
Students with disabilities participate with their general education peers during activities.*



If a student with disabilities needs assistance, general education peers help them without prompting.*



If a student with disabilities is being bullied, general education bystanders respond by removing them from the situation and/or telling an adult.*





Circle of Friends An Evidence-Based Practice



Circle of Friends is a highly effective model for improving inclusion and strengthening social skills for students with disabilities and other social challenges. The following nationally recognized organizations endorse key components of the Circle of Friends approach: working with students in the natural environment with feedback from peers who are trained to model and shape social language skills.

National Autism Center: Circle of Friends meets the criteria for being an Evidence-Based Practice as identified by their **National Standards Project**¹⁴. Our program incorporates three established treatments shown to be effective for individuals on the autism spectrum:

- *Peer Training Package*
- *Natural Teaching Strategies*
- *Modeling*

National Professional Development Center¹⁶ on Autism Spectrum Disorder: Circle of Friends is well-aligned with Evidence-Based Practices identified through the following:

CoF components include:

- *Modeling*
- *Naturalistic Intervention*
- *Peer-Mediated Instruction & Intervention*
- *Prompting*

CoF supports successful carryover from:

- *Social Narratives*
- *Social Skills Training*
- *Structured Play Group*

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) defines inclusive practices as interventions in which “the unique needs of children with communication disorders are met in the least restrictive environment. ASHA advocates for inclusive practices as an appropriate service delivery model.”

Autism Speaks: Circle of Friends strengthens areas that promote a successful transition to adult life. The Autism Speaks **Transition Tool Kit**¹⁷ provides research-based strategies useful across all systems to build life skills for community employment. The following four strategies are Evidence-Based Predictors for post-school success:

- *Inclusive Practices and Programs*
- *Collaborative Networks for Student Support*
- *Social and Social-Emotional Instruction and Skills*
- *Self-Determination, Independent Living and Skill Building*



Circle of Friends
The Path to Inclusion
Annual Membership

In response to ongoing school budget constraints and the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, Circle of Friends is now providing our School Inclusion Program remotely. This reduces the coordination and cost of onsite training, and includes resources and strategies for remote, hybrid and in-person learning environments.

Workshops will be recorded, allowing school inclusion teams to review content and schedule planning at their convenience.

Schools can implement CoF throughout the year, optimally between August and April.

Membership Includes:

- Initial consultation and needs assessment w/District Administrator to set goals and identify school(s) implementing CoF.
- One Onsite training or site visit. (schools in LA County/Orange only)
- Three 90-min. Zoom workshops.
- Follow-up Zoom conference calls 2-4 weeks after each workshop for additional coaching and support.
- Monthly Resources throughout the school year.
- Opportunities to connect with advisors with similar populations & establish Veteran/New school pairings.
- Permission to use CoF logo access to archived and updated program materials.
- Annual Program Survey to assess participation and progress.

Total Cost: \$5,500.00*.

*Additional site visits, in-person consultation and onsite trainings are available for the additional cost of approximately \$1,000/day, including travel.



Circle of Friends Funding Opportunities



Circle of Friends (CoF) typically partners with up to **five schools** in a district to successfully implement our School Inclusion Program. Our annual contract includes **three workshops, site visits, comprehensive resources** and **unlimited phone/email support** from our Program Facilitators.

CoF Program Facilitators are experienced **Special Educators and Speech-Language Pathologists**

Workshops cover:

- Establishing school inclusion on your campus
- Strengthening and expanding the program
- Increasing participation to engage the entire student body
- Promoting a safer school through Ability Awareness and other student-led service projects.

Sources districts have used to fund school inclusion:

- CARES Act ESSER Funding
- State and federal funds for inclusion of students with disabilities, Bullying Prevention, or Safe Schools
- LCAP goals addressing Student Engagement and School Climate
- Principal's discretionary funds and PTSA support
- Local business and charitable organizations (e.g., banks that want to support neighborhood schools; Lions, Elks, and Kiwanis clubs; etc.)
- Regional grants and educational foundations.
- Sponsorship of specific schools by families or alumni.
- PBIS, RTI and MTSS Initiatives.

**For further program information and funding ideas,
please contact *Circle of Friends* at 323-352-3019.**



Circle of Friends Testimonials



“CoF has taught me so many things. One thing is that any kind action such as a smile or saying ‘Hi’, can make someone else’s day. The students with special needs are truly the kindest, sweetest and most loving people I know. They make me a better person just by being around them. Joining Circle of Friends has really made my year.” **America, Calexico Unified School District student**

“I have learned a lot about the nature of empathy, a subject that I have struggled with as a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The skills I have learned through these programs will last me a lifetime and will certainly make navigation through the social world easier. Of the 171,476 words in the English dictionary, no single word, nor combination of words, can even begin to describe the value I place upon this program.” **Joseph, San Benito HS student**

“Earlier this year, a young man who was new to our school approached me during lunch and asked if he could join CoF. He was getting sent to the office for misconduct and bullying, but I couldn’t say no. After a few weeks in our program this student began organizing play dates during lunch with his peers in special education. His behavior was greatly impacted by the opportunity to take on a leadership role and become the voice for a friend who didn’t have one. By establishing a school climate where we learn to understand and respect people of all backgrounds and abilities, we in turn create an environment where students and their families are valued for who they are.”

Erick, LAUSD teacher

“Throughout this program, I’ve had the pleasure of changing someone’s life. But in the long run, they’re the ones changing mine.” **Jenna, 7th Grade student**

“We have seen important benefits in Robin’s life as a result of her participation in Circle of Friends. Her relationship with these friends makes her feel special and gives her self-esteem. She now feels part of the campus and the community instead of being segregated. The happiness Circle of Friends has brought to her life is immeasurable! Every participant in this program, disabled or non-disabled, has his or her life touched in positive, beautiful and lasting ways.”

Penny, Santa Monica HS parent

“Circle of Friends gives our students membership into an inclusive school community: they feel included and know that they have friends.” **Hannah, Modoc County SELPA Director**

“This year, our 6th grade field trip to Disneyland was scheduled for our Circle of Friends meeting day. One of our students said he didn’t want to go because he would miss his friends. We were happy to tell him that his friends would be going too, but that really shows how important this program is!”

CoF Advisor, Alliance College-Ready Public Schools

“I’m not lonely anymore. And when I do get some company, my life suddenly becomes whole.”

Amelia, Santa Monica HS student



Program Links & Citations

Circle of Friends' Elementary Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWKY87aIBp8&t=56s>

Imperial County Office of Education's CoF video <https://youtu.be/-LbEgiWoZMg>

Supporting Research:

1. <https://www.ncl.org/research/forward-together/>
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>
3. https://www.childtrends.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/02/ACESBriefUpdated_ChildTrends_February2018.pdf
4. <https://www.ncl.org/research/forward-together/>
5. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/07/17/teachers-support-social-emotional-learning-but-say-students.html>
6. <https://www.educationdive.com/news/survey-teachers-need-time-training-to-support-students-social-emotional/559212/>
7. <https://operationrespect.org/get-informed/statistics/>
8. <https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/system/files?file=file-attachments/CM6101.pdf>
9. <https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2018/04/24/feds-restraint-seclusion-schools/25015/>
10. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>
11. <https://www.americaspromise.org/opinion/link-between-suspensions-expulsions-and-dropout-rates>
12. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/the-cost-of-teacher-turnover>
13. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5578874/>
14. <http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/>
15. <http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/>
16. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/transition-tool-kit>
17. <https://www.pacer.org/bullying/resources/stats.asp>

CoF in The News!

Santa Clarita, CA: Circle of Friends Helps Build Lunchtime Bonds: <https://youtu.be/Up--vol6dNc>

San Benito, CA <https://www.ksbw.com/article/first-ever-inclusion-night-held-at-san-benito-high-school-game/29276588>

El Centro, CA: <https://kyma.com/news/imperial-county/2019/12/05/circle-of-friends-from-local-schools-participates-in-inclusion-week/>