Supporting autistic people at risk of sexual offending

For 25 years Respond has been addressing the needs of people with learning disabilities and/or autism who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour\(^1\) or sexually offend. Our specialist risk assessment, psychotherapy and consultation services have developed to meet these complex needs.

We found that this client group often had little support in the community, were isolated and stigmatised. Yet with support, care and positive relationships the risk of repeated harmful behaviour could decline. We discovered a need for a different non-clinical form of support to work alongside our therapeutic work. It was from this belief that the Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA) project at Respond was born.

What is a Circle of Support and Accountability?

A Circle is a group of 4 – 6 specially trained volunteers who work together to form a “mini-community” around the core member (the person with the harmful sexual behaviour). They meet weekly for a period of 18 months.

The volunteers support the core member to be better integrated in society. They help build a safe, positive and purposeful life. They also hold the core member to account for risky behaviour and thoughts, thus acting as a safety net for the community.

How were Circles created?

Circles began in Canada in the 1990s in response to the release of a high profile sex offender. A faith based group agreed that they would befriend this individual on the understanding that they would support him but also question any future potentially harmful behaviour. For 11

\(^1\) Harmful sexual behaviour includes; inappropriate touching; using sexual violence or threats; and sexual acts with children or non-consenting adults. People who develop harmful sexual behaviour often harm themselves and others.
years until his death, the Circle proved to be a lifeline for this man where he forged true friendships and despite predictions to the contrary, lived within the community without offending.

The model was brought to the UK by the Quakers and in 2007 was handed over to Circles UK, the national umbrella organization which is funded by the Ministry of Justice to oversee individual Circle projects. There are now some 17 projects across England and Wales; principally working with convicted sex offenders.

Does it work?

Respond has been working with the Circles model for over 4 years now and has seen significant benefits for not only the core members but also the community of volunteers who support them and society at large.

Respond measures the outcomes of its Circles model using clinical psychometric tests and interviews, in which data is collected to evaluate potential improvements in the emotional and social status of the core member.

Areas in which there has been considerable improvement are:

- personal responsibility
- socialisation
- confidence
- a sense of self and communication.

All these factors work together to support the core member as they continue to maintain an offence-free lifestyle and strive for community integration.

Outcomes for volunteers include:

- a stronger sense of community safety
- a better understanding of the causes of sexual offending
- increased knowledge of learning disabilities and autism
- more context of sexual offenders as humans with individual stories

Within the community we have seen the “ripple” effect; the volunteers act as ambassadors spreading awareness and tackling prejudice and ignorance around issues of harmful sexual behaviour and learning disabilities and autism.

Case study

Joel (not his real name) was a 17 year old mixed race young man with a diagnosis of global development delay, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He had experienced acute neglect and emotional abuse from an early age. As a result he was removed from the care of his biological mother at the age of 2 and placed with a foster family with whom he remained.
Joel was referred to Respond by his school for a risk assessment as a result of his harmful sexual behaviour towards young children. Amongst the recommendations of the risk assessment was the offer of a Circle of Support & Accountability for Joel. A group of specially trained volunteers would meet with him regularly. They would offer companionship and help him with his social and emotional needs. They would help Joel think about his harmful sexual behaviour and support him to express his feelings in a more appropriate manner.

The Circle consisted of 4 specially trained volunteers; 2 women and 2 men, two of whom were of Afro-Caribbean origin. Joel’s foster brother brought him to the meetings which were held at Respond’s central London office. The Circle met weekly over a period of 12 months and less frequently in the last 6 months.

The volunteers were made aware of Joel’s history and childhood difficulties, and understood that it was a priority to ensure that he did not put others at risk. To that end volunteers were in regular contact with the COSA Coordinator and, through her, the professionals also working with Joel; in this case, his head-teacher, social worker and psychologist.

In the early meetings the focus of the Circle was on everyone getting to know each other and creating a non-judgmental and comfortable working space. It quickly became apparent that Joel communicated best via interactive play and games. The volunteers showed great ingenuity in inventing creative modes of communication. These helped to develop his thinking, talking and listening skills.

In time, the Circle was able to speak more openly about sex, relationships and friendships. The volunteers used role playing to help Joel understand feelings and behaviour from the perspective of others. They devised practical strategies to help avoid risky situations.

By the end of the Circle Joel was able to talk about his harmful sexual behaviour. His confidence and communication skills had improved immeasurably. His ability to express his feelings and to empathise with others had also developed. He was more socially integrated into his peer group and reported that he better understood the impact of his behaviour on others.

Further information

Respond is able to provide Circles for people with learning disabilities and/or autism across the London area. If you would like to talk about a potential referral, or are interested in volunteering as a Circle member then please visit our website for more information.