

# Starting a Friendship Circle

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## **What is the Friendship Circle?**

The Friendship Circle extends a helping hand to families who have children with special needs and involves them in a full range of social and Judaic experiences. The unique formula introduces teenage volunteers to the children and their families, and through the shared experiences, all are enriched.

- The child with special needs looks forward to the opportunity to play with and learn from their older friends.
- The teenage volunteer learns the value of giving, and cherishes the experience of making a difference in a child's life and bringing a smile to his or her face.
- The child's family gets a needed respite and the pleasure of seeing their child become a part of the community circle.

## **The Philosophy**

Our philosophy is based on the belief that each special child is a valuable and important member of our community, with an integral role in its growth and development. Each child has the right to an adapted education, opportunities for improving life skills and communication and socio-emotional support. We as members of the community must offer our respect for their strengths while focusing on supporting their needs. We must build on the similarities of the special child and other children and accept the differences. The family must be an integral part of this effort, their input treated with respect and their participation in planning individual programs for their child encouraged.

## **The Objective**

To raise consciousness in the community and be of help to its members with special needs. The Friendship Circle strives to create a bond between teenagers and special children. Our objective is three fold:

1. To provide an additional program for children with special needs.
2. To help shape the personality and sense of responsibility of teenagers.
3. To offer a weekly respite for the family.

Friendship Circle meet the social and emotional needs of each child in a comprehensive, professional and effective manner. It will provide a setting rich Jewish tradition and teachings. It will foster volunteerism, compassion among our youth. It will battle prejudice and encourage inclusion and opportunities for integration.

## **Basic Criteria**

The Friendship Circle will service children with a wide range of physical and developmental challenges. Each individual program will be designed so that the unique needs of the children between 2 – 15 yrs. are serviced by trained teenagers accordingly.

### **What Makes Friendship Circle Unique**

One of the major differences between Friendship Circle and other similar organizations is that many see people with disabilities as having a deficiency that needs to be addressed. This is why they assign buddies to "save the day" and be their volunteers to help compensate for the individual's disabilities or shortcomings.

Friendship Circle on the other hand sees people with disabilities as having major potential to influence others with their unique qualities. They are non judgmental, they don't lie or cheat; they are always happy and positive about life etc. We believe that a neshama comes down to the world for a specific purpose. If there were two people alike, one would be extra and nothing in the world is created extra. So Friendship Circle sends volunteers to appreciate and learn from these children and understand what's important in life.

### **Demographic Guidelines**

Being that the Friendship Circle program is for a very select yet vital part of the community, it is imperative that there are no conflicting and competing programs within the same area for the following reasons:

- A. There is only a limited pool of children with special needs to cater to. These families are usually a tight group who network together and share resources.
- B. This is a specialty program, comparable to a camp or Jewish day school where one suffices for an entire region. This program is not like a Shul/Minyan where there is a need for one per community.
- C. The ability to run a full variety of programs (thus being a better resource to the families and becoming a force within the community) is only possible with a larger pool of participating families.
- D. The volunteers will most likely be from the few local schools and there should not be an overlap of volunteers for 2 different Friendship Circles.
- E. The funding that comes from the Federation and other local foundations will be held back when they see that there are competing programs in the same area.
- F. Due to the extremely sensitive nature of the program there is a higher likelihood of possible pitfalls of a negative effect of an error committed by another Friendship Circle program in very close proximity. This is especially possible if the proper attention is not given to the program.
- G. The benefits to all the Shluchim in an area serviced by a strong centralized Friendship Circle is much greater than with each Shliach running their own small program.

Due to the unique circumstances of the program:

- A. There can only be one Friendship Circle per county.
- B. There has to be at least a 20-25 mile separation between locations.
- C. If one Federation caters to an area, then one Friendship Circle should suffice as well.

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### **Approval Process**

A considerable amount of research is required to start a Friendship Circle. A complete beginner package has been put together for this purpose. The package includes a 200 page manual, audio of the Friendship Circle start up lecture and a Friends @ Home kit to help you launch your first program.

Only once your research is completed will you receive an application form that will be reviewed by the executive vaad. Members of the vaad will review the applications and approve your Friendship Circle based on the following criteria:

1. Your Chabad Center covers a large metro area
2. There are no other Friendship Circle locations in your area
3. Shluchim who have appointed a couple to run the Friendship Circle
4. Shluchim who have attended the annual Friendship Circle Kinus
5. Countries or states that do not have a Friendship Circle yet.

### **Personnel to run the Friendship Circle**

Executive Director – Responsible for funding

Director of Operations - Responsible for the day to day programming and the administrative needs.

### **Support Staff**

Some are volunteer positions; others may be combined under one title:

Volunteer coordinator

Programming coordinator

Public Relations coordinator

Educational/Training coordinator

Transportation coordinator

Community Liaison

Volunteer activity leader

Office staff

### **Financial Development**

Private Donors

Family Foundations/Grants

Corporate Sponsors

Government Sources

Ministry of Social Services

Health Ministry

Grants

### **Volunteer Recruitment**

Community High Schools

Local High Schools

University Students in appropriate faculties

Synagogue Youth Groups

Referrals

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### **Volunteer Training**

Awareness and sensitivity perception  
Behavior management policy and guidelines  
Confidentiality  
Child Guidance  
Intervention strategies  
Conflict resolution  
Augmentative communication strategies  
Basic first aid – medical issues

### **Family Recruitment**

Referrals  
Medical professionals  
Therapists  
Educational centers  
Rehab programs  
Participating families

### **Basic Programs:**

#### **Friends @ Home**

Weekday/weekend individual programming

Volunteers visit with the children in their homes for a minimum of 2 hours per week. After trust is established and where mobility is not a concern visits to neighborhood locations are encouraged. The Friends@Home program provides children with the chance to bond with their volunteers in an environment they are most comfortable: their own homes. Together, they can bake cookies, play games, create arts 'n crafts, read books and do just about anything fun. With so much to look forward to at these visits children wait all week for their volunteers to show up at their doorsteps.

#### **Children’s Circle - Regular Sunday Programming**

Volunteers and children meet as a group in a central location for approximately 3 hours. Recreational activities are programmed. These may include Arts & Crafts, games, drama, music and swimming. This is an opportunity to work on social skills, fine motor, hand-eye coordination, communication, as well as focus and concentration.

#### **Holiday Programs**

Annual Tishrei, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, Shavuot celebrations. Special occasion events held within the framework of existing organizational programs. These occasions create opportunities for inclusion and integrated activities.

#### **Volunteer Programs**

The true beauty of the Friendship Circle is the interaction between the volunteers and the child with special needs. The love that these teenagers feel for their special friends is boundless and the impact that they have on these children is endless. The volunteers enjoy exciting outings and receive great prizes. Volunteering at your Friendship Circle can also be a significant form of community service, and your teens will take pride in being part of this seamless circle of Friendship.

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**Special Needs Stats:**

Today, at least 1 in 12 children has some form of special needs. It may be cerebral palsy or autism. It may be learning disabilities or ADHD. The common thread between most disabilities is the fact that they make children seem different to their peers. It may be a wheelchair, the inability for a child to verbalize his thoughts, or simply struggling to read or write that can cause a chasm between a child and the rest of the children at school, at summer camp or at the local youth group. Even more painful than the stares, the impatience and the difficulties in communicating is the phone that doesn't ring, the empty afternoons longing for companionship, a playmate or just someone to talk to. For a child with special needs, loneliness and isolation can very often be a regular part of life. Families of children with special needs also feel their pain. They are used to the stares and coldness of people who do not understand, of people who are frightened to face someone who is different than them, or those who fear that they will do or say the wrong thing. These families are used to protecting themselves, and especially their children, from the pain of rejection. They turn inside themselves, and further away from the community.

They distance themselves from those who are too uncomfortable to care, and turn to those who offer them care, support, understanding and hope. It is for this reason that they very often do not frequent community centers, synagogues, local schools and camps. They feel isolated and alienated from a community that has not opened its arms to them and their children.

**Links:**

Headquarters Friendship Circle website: [www.friendshipcircle.com](http://www.friendshipcircle.com)

International Volunteer Network: [www.fcvolunteer.com](http://www.fcvolunteer.com)

International Parent Network: <http://www.friendshipcircle.com/parents.asp>

Flagship Friendship Circle Center in West Bloomfield, MI [www.friendshipcircle.org](http://www.friendshipcircle.org)

Friendship Circle Resource Center [www.shluchim.org/friendshipcircle](http://www.shluchim.org/friendshipcircle)

Awareness for children with special needs [www.imprinttheworld.com](http://www.imprinttheworld.com)

Walk A Thon: [www.FriendshipCircleWalk.com](http://www.FriendshipCircleWalk.com)