

## Circles of relationship: teaching social distance

By Dr. John Taylor and Janis Fry

In our last issue, we talked about the need to make our expectations for behaviours explicit to children who are new to our families. We also discussed how some children, especially those from foster or institutional care, may have had multiple caregivers, all or some of whom may have been relative strangers. It is not surprising that such children may seek affection indiscriminately from adults or children they have just met. Nor should it be surprising that children who have experienced or witnessed abuse should be confused, triggered, or frightened by any form of physical touch.

Therefore, teaching our children about social distance and levels of intimacy is another way that we promote social skills and keep everyone safe. Dr. Taylor explains that, as with expectations and social norms, the challenge is to take vague, subjective (and often unstated) concepts and make them real, or concrete, for our children.

There are a number of tools available in books and online that can help parents with this task. Most of them use a graphic model of concentric circles to depict the varying levels of intimacy or personal contact that is appropriate with the range of people we encounter in our lives. Here, we are using an adaptation of the CIRCLES program (Champagne and Walker-Hirsch, 1993) to illustrate one way in which parents can create a starting place for on-going discussions with their children.

The script that follows is unique to your family because each family is different. For example, an uncle or a grandparent who lives halfway around the world may not be in the Family circle; the soccer coach who would usually be viewed as an Acquaintance may, in fact, be as close as a favourite auntie. Parents, along with their children, discuss the relationships and talk about where individuals are in that child's CIRCLE. Having said that, the more concrete we can be will help the child to be able to categorize people they meet on a daily basis.

As you can see, these scripts are complex and need to be highly individualized to reflect the family characteristics, and the child's developmental stage and/or special needs. Teachers are an example of people whose role and significance may vary greatly among children or even the same child year to year.

This is not intended to be a one-time teaching moment but a tool that gives both common language and visual imagery to facilitate on-going discussion for the family. Create your child's CIRCLE filling in the people you can identify for each concentric ring, post in on your fridge or in your child's room, and talk about it often! Talking as a family about boundaries creates a language and a culture of openness, which promotes safety and reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding or secrecy and, in extreme cases, false or mistaken allegations.



## Example Script

Note: Circles are colour coded so you can refer to them easily and keep visually reinforcing the information you are giving. Having the child select the colours is one way of engaging them in the model.

### 1. self

The Green Circle is you because you are the most important person in your world. No one touches you unless you want to be touched. (Depending on the age or cognitive ability of your child, this is where you would want to explain the distinction between consent, compliance and coercion).

### 2. family

The Yellow Circle is our Family Circle (sometimes called the Big Hug Circle) – Mom, Dad, siblings and appropriate extended family. These are the people you may hug or get hugs from and we may tell each other that we love each other. (Here you might want to talk about how your family typically shows affections – hugs, kisses, words – or demonstrate the kind of hugs or touch that occur in your family).

### 3. friends

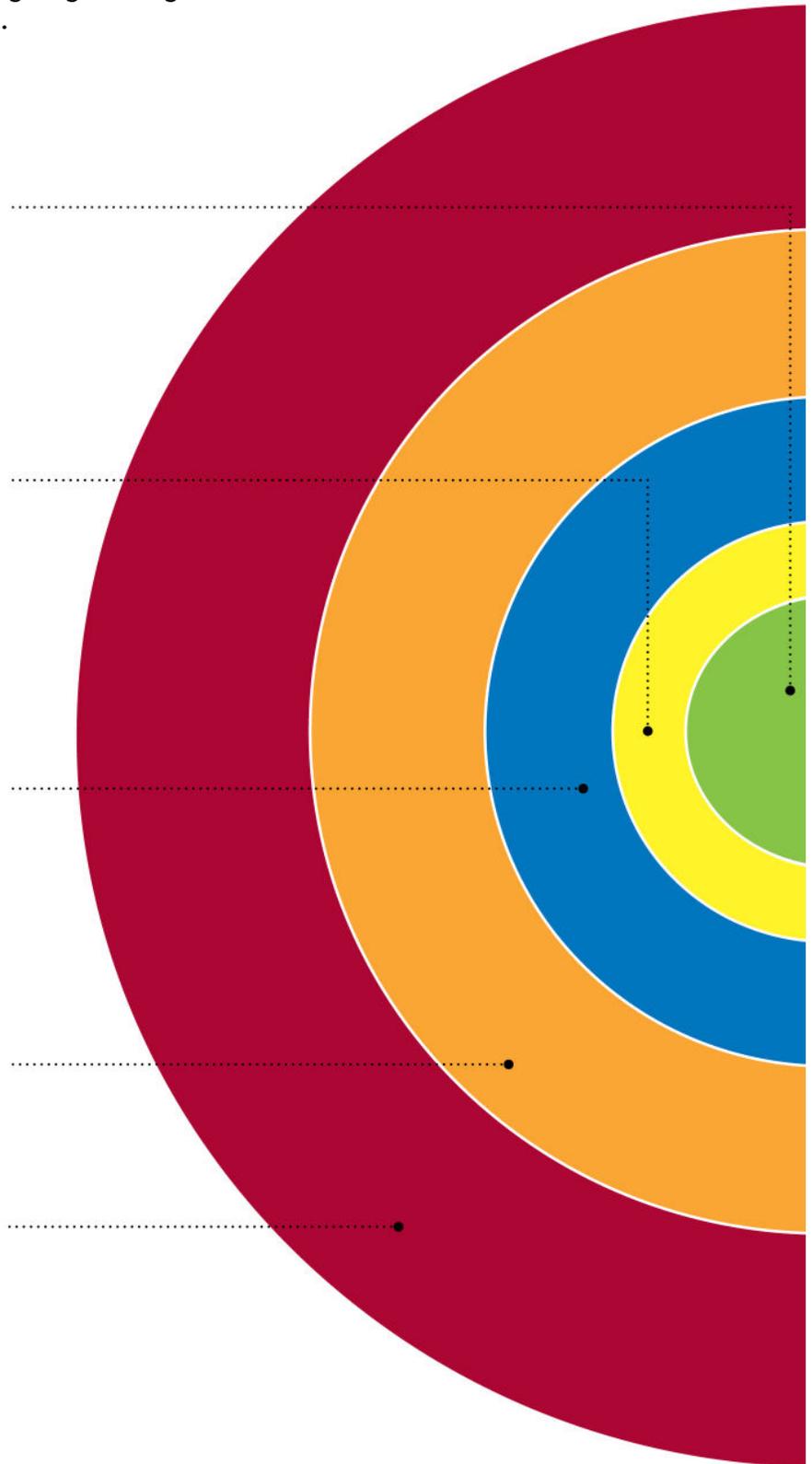
The Blue Circle is for friends who you feel very close to. You may give them friendly hugs (shoulder to shoulder), pats on the back, high-fives, or sometimes tell them you like them. (Again, depending on the maturity of the child, you might want to put actual photos of the persons that fit into each circle).

### 4. acquaintances

4. The Orange Circle is the Acquaintance Circle. Even if you see these people every day, you are not friends with them. You may or may not know their names. They could be classmates or team-mates, coaches, neighbours or others. These are not people we would hug, but we might say hello or shake their hand.

### 5. strangers

The Red Circle is for Strangers. You do not know these people at all even if you have seen them once or twice before. You don't talk to them except maybe to say excuse me or thank you (store clerk). You do not touch strangers and they do not touch you.



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