

Understanding the Impact of Family Circles Through Participants' Perceptions

A Restorative Approach to Strengthening Family Relationships

By Lutheran Community Care Services

lccs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines participants' experiences of Lutheran Community Care Services' Family Circles, drawing on interviews with 16 families who took part through Project Kaleidoscope or The Builders Project, and on post-programme feedback forms. The analysis identifies seven themes, spanning facilitation, communication, perceived change, emotional safety, programme fit, and participant feedback, and six candidate outcome domains, from child emotional regulation and parent communication to co-parent alignment and reflective parenting.

Participants described the facilitator's presence and structured activities as helping family members listen, speak more openly, and hear perspectives that might not surface in ordinary conversations. Some families reported better understanding, emotional expression, connection, and calmer responses at home. Others described little change or difficulty sustaining new practices, especially when strategies were hard to use under stress, the content did not fit their family's needs, or practical and relational barriers limited participation.

Overall, accounts suggest that participants' perceived benefit depended not only on session content but also on facilitation, readiness, family circumstances, programme fit, and follow-up. A supplementary analysis suggests that ADHD-focused parenting workshops, mentoring sessions for children, Family Circle sessions, and behavioural tools served different perceived functions, with prior knowledge, child readiness, and the ability to practise skills at home shaping families' experiences. Families identified practical areas for improvement, including clearer preparation, consistent facilitation, adaptable activities and settings, in-session practice, and follow-up suited to different needs.

These findings reflect participant perceptions and do not show that Family Circles caused the reported changes or that they lasted. The findings are best used to refine the programme's theory of change and to guide future evaluation that separately measures session experience, relationship change, use of strategies at home, and sustained outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Family stress can make it difficult for parents and children to communicate, listen, and respond constructively to one another. These challenges may be especially acute when a child has ADHD or other socioemotional difficulties, when family members are at different stages of readiness, or when everyday pressures leave little time for shared reflection. As children and youth grow and encounter challenges associated with different developmental stages, parents may find it increasingly difficult to stay connected and engage in meaningful dialogue. Small misunderstandings can quickly escalate into shouting, withdrawal, repeated conflict, or tantrums. Over time, these patterns can weaken trust and increase emotional distress for children, young people, and caregivers.

Family Circles offer a restorative, relationship-based approach to strengthening communication and improving family relationships. Family Circles are structured and facilitated conversations that bring children and parents together in a safe and respectful space. Rather than focusing primarily on behaviour management or discipline, Family Circles create an opportunity for every family member—including children—to share their feelings, needs, and experiences. Guided by simple agreements and structured questions, participants are supported to speak honestly, listen deeply, and understand one another more fully. Importantly, children are not spoken about but spoken with, recognising their agency and voice. This strengthens children's emotional security, while also helping adults better understand what may lie beneath a child's behaviour. Through this process, Family Circles encourage open communication, mutual understanding, and collective problem-solving.

The project identifies a gap in LCCS' current evaluation approach, which relies on post-session feedback forms: immediate feedback can capture how participants felt about a session but may not show how families understood change, what they carried into daily life, or which programme components they found useful. This distinction matters for family interventions. A qualitative study of parents' experiences in a family-strengthening programme, for example, found that participants described changes in connection, dialogue, understanding, and coping as linked aspects of family functioning (Burn et al., 2019). In ADHD intervention research,

engagement, fit, and the implementation of strategies across everyday settings are recognized as important challenges; access and family circumstances can affect whether families can use an intervention as intended (Chacko et al., 2024; Eiraldi et al., 2012). These findings support examining not only satisfaction, but also participants' accounts of how change may occur and where it is constrained.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines participant perceptions of Family Circles, focusing on perceived relational and communication changes, the features participants associated with those changes, and barriers to fit and follow-through. It treats participant accounts as evidence of experience and perceived contribution, not as proof that the programme caused lasting change. The analysis addresses three questions:

1. What benefits, limitations, and changes did participating families describe?
2. What features of Family Circles did participants associate with openness, communication, and perceived family change?
3. What programme conditions or family circumstances appeared to enable or limit engagement and use of learning after sessions?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The interview sample comprised 16 families with school-going children aged 8 to 11. All 16 families had participated in Family Circles with LCCS via two programmes – Project Kaleidoscope (for children with ADHD) (n=11) and The Builders Project (n=5).

In Project Kaleidoscope, parents and children attend separate workshops to learn about how to better communicate and relate to each other. The workshops covered ADHD-specific topics and introduced restorative practices for everyday communication. After every 2 workshops, parents and children participate in a facilitated Family Circle by LCCS' trained facilitators. All families go through a total of 4 workshops and 2 facilitated Family Circles. Families were also

introduced to behavioural tools, such as 100-star charts and other visual aids during Family Circles. These were intended to help children work towards goals and to give families a shared way of tracking and talking about behaviour between sessions.

In The Builders Project, children participate in mentoring sessions with a trained social worker for a period of 4 to 6 months before one Family Circle is facilitated between child and parent by LCCS' trained facilitators, typically toward the end of the programme.

The analysis includes parent accounts about children's participation and change. Interviews were conducted with one parent in each family. Statements about children's experiences should be understood as reported by adults rather than as children's own accounts.

Study design and data analysis

Qualitative data was obtained using semi-structured interviews with one parent in the family. 7 post-programme feedback forms from families who participated in one of the programmes (Project Kaleidoscope) were also included in the data analysis. The interviews were conducted by research assistants who were not involved in the programmes. Thematic analysis was completed to identify perceived outcomes, mechanisms of change, and enabling or limiting factors. Thematic and trend analysis was supported by a subscription software called Marvin AI, focused on supporting qualitative research.

The study used a general inductive approach – codes and themes were developed from the interview and feedback-form data rather than organised in advance under a pre-existing theory or framework. Seven major themes (comprising 22 subthemes) were identified: facilitator role, communication skills, changes and improvements, perceived benefits and outcomes, emotional safety and support, programme accessibility and suitability, and feedback on the Family Circle experience.

FINDINGS

The Family Circles programme is described as a facilitated, relationship-based intervention involving structured questions and activities for parents and children. There were some differences in the themes and topics discussed in Family Circles between the families from

Project Kaleidoscope and The Builders Project. Participants whose children were enrolled in the The Builders Project recalled that their Family Circles focused on children's hopes, family strengths, and general school experiences. On the other hand, participants whose children were enrolled in Project Kaleidoscope recalled that their Family Circles focused on family goals and areas of challenges and joy

The thematic analysis suggests that participants experienced Family Circles not simply as a set of communication exercises, but as a facilitated family encounter whose value depended on how safely, skilfully, and appropriately it was delivered. Participants described moments of new understanding and improved communication, alongside accounts of limited transfer into home life, poor fit, or sessions that were not helpful for their family.

Four linked patterns organise the accounts. First, facilitator structure—including neutrality, turn-taking, and timely intervention—helped some families speak and listen differently, while preparation and facilitation gaps limited others. Second, participants described changes in emotional expression, parental responses, and understanding, but these changes were uneven. Third, in-session insight did not always carry into daily family life, especially under stress. Finally, families differed in readiness, prior knowledge, programme fit, and practical needs, leading them to ask for more flexible content and follow-up. These patterns draw together the seven themes identified in the analysis, and the final section sets out the candidate outcome domains derived from them.

Facilitated structure enabled different conversations

Participants repeatedly described the facilitator's presence as enabling conversations that were harder to have when a parent asked the same questions. A participant explained that children answered differently when the facilitator asked questions a parent had already tried asking:

> *"He [the facilitator] is objective, and he doesn't know them [the children] very well, so he can prompt them, or he can push further, right? But they will be willing to answer because if it's the same question I asked them, but when I push further, they will not answer, right? Because it's a parent and child, and then someone else asking the same question, they will freely give the answers."*
>
> — Parent 14

Some parents also described listening more intentionally. Another participant said the session changed the pace of a familiar conversation:

> *"The presence of a neutral person to facilitate is something that I don't normally have in conversations with my kids... it created a space for me to listen more... I mean, I do listen, but this time it's a lot more intentional. My pause was a lot longer."*
>
> — Parent 1

Participants also valued specific practices that organised the conversation. A talking piece used in the conversation supported turn-taking and reduced interruptions. Visual and hands-on activities helped some children engage when verbal reflection alone was difficult. In one account, a child was given a chance to co-lead an activity, which changed the parent's view of the child's capability. Participants also described facilitators stepping in when emotions rose, making it possible to pause rather than press for immediate resolution.

These accounts were not uniformly positive. One family described a facilitator who did not redirect a participant whose answers were experienced as off-topic, leaving the session unhelpful. Other accounts pointed to the value of preparation before the session and continuity of the facilitator across sessions. One parent valued the facilitator's judgement in pausing an emotionally charged discussion, recalling the facilitator saying:

> *"It doesn't all have to be ironed out tonight. We can all go back and think about it and then we can come and revisit this another time."*
>
> — Parent 7

Taken together, participants associated the facilitator's contribution with both impartiality and active relational work: setting boundaries, adapting activities, supporting children's participation, reframing responses, and judging when to continue or pause.

Shifts in communication and understanding

Participants described changes in listening and emotional expression. Examples included waiting for a child to answer before responding, using "I" statements, naming feelings, and drawing on restorative questions.

> *“He [the child] can use the 'I' statement. That is something that they [the facilitators from LCCS] actually, during the workshop at the center, including when coming to our home, they also shared with us how that could be done. I find that it's very useful for me. But in fact, the best thing after that is that my kids seem to practice it.”*
>
> — Parent 15

This participant described a change in how her son communicated during distress. She contrasted this with earlier episodes when he could not express what he needed and might throw things:

> *“He's [the child] able to say, 'I know I need to cool down, but you need to give me time.' Although he's still moving, he's fidgeting and all that, but he didn't expressly mention 'I am angry, I'm sad'... maybe it's in his process...But what I felt good is that he's aware of it. He will mention...'I need you to be here. I know I need to calm down and you just need to stay with me but do nothing,' something like that, which I see as an improvement.”*
>
> — Parent 15

Some parents described trying to replace immediate scolding with direct expression of their own feelings or a more reflective response to a child’s behaviour.

> *"I tend to tell him [the child] what I feel directly instead of being angry and just scolding him. Yeah, so this was something that I kept in mind."*
>
> — Parent 13

Emotional regulation was described as important but difficult to sustain in the moment. Participants said that strategies that seemed useful in theory could be hard to apply when family members were angry, distracted, or under pressure. A participant described the difficulty of carrying learning into a heated moment:

> *“We found it theoretically helpful. However, during execution at home, especially when the energy level and emotions are high, it’s quite difficult to execute.”*
>
> — Parent 10

Several accounts distinguished calmer communication from respectful communication: families could see some progress in reducing escalation while still finding tone and respect difficult.

Participants' accounts therefore suggest partial and variable change rather than a uniform shift in communication.

Some families described a change in how they understood a child's behaviour or emotional needs. Others described hearing an unexpected answer, recognising a child's affection or admiration, or becoming more aware of their own exhaustion. One participant recalled discovering how strongly her daughter looked up to her:

> *"Happy to find out her perspective on stuff... I always knew I mattered to her, but I didn't know that I mattered that much."*
>
> — Parent 1

These were perceived relational outcomes even where participants did not describe a durable change in everyday behaviour.

Translation of perceived gains into daily life

Several families described improved connection, greater empathy, shared goals, or changes in how parents and children responded to one another. Some reported using strategies after the sessions, including pausing, walking away during escalation, or returning to a conversation later. Participants also described the joint family format as offering something different from a child attending individual support alone: it created a shared experience and common reference points for parents and children.

Other families reported limited or no change. The analysis identifies several distinct explanations: some families already had substantial knowledge or communication routines; some understood the content but could not apply it under stress; and some felt that the programme did not match their child's needs, developmental stage, or family circumstances. One account characterised the experience as meaningful but not helpful for that family. Another described a negative session experience that made the programme materials difficult to use afterward. One parent suggested making the take-home tools easier to use:

> *"I would say, gamify it a bit more...writing stuff and pasting it is also a chore to him [the child]. So, I mean, it's good for us... but for him, it's not interesting...then I have to*

> *explain…It's really difficult to follow through… I will not say omit, but you can maybe make it easier. For example, maybe an online form… like a task list."*
>
> — Parent 13

Participants also distinguished positive feelings during a session from continued use at home. Some valued the session but did not sustain the activities or tools after the facilitator left. Requests for execution-focused practice, lighter follow-up tools, and continued contact suggest that participants saw transfer into daily life as a separate challenge from understanding the programme content.

Programme fit, continuity and emotional safety shaped participation

Families described different needs for session length, frequency, setting, and content. Many wanted additional sessions or follow-up, while others preferred brief check-ins because regular visits could disrupt routines or increase stress. Participants requested more age-appropriate and ADHD-specific content, activities involving movement or games, and time for families to practise skills together during sessions. They also identified the need to match introductory information to families' prior knowledge and current circumstances.

Practical and relational conditions also affected access. Participants described scheduling conflicts, travel and meal routines, difficulty sitting through tabletop activities, and discomfort with a home visit. Some preferred advance notice of the Family Circle questions; others wanted a choice of venue, including an outdoor or neutral setting. One family described a change in facilitator as disrupting rapport and continuity. These accounts indicate that a single delivery format may not fit all families.

Emotional safety was also described as relational and conditional rather than automatic. Some participants felt able to speak openly with children present but not with a spouse, or initially felt uncomfortable inviting facilitators into the home. One parent felt their home was not a suitable setting for the session, with too many distractions. Other families described turn-taking, appropriate pacing, facilitator consistency, and time as conditions that helped safety develop.

Potential indicators of improved family functioning

Participant-reported outcomes can be grouped into six domains. These can guide future measurement, but they are not validated indicators or estimates of programme effect. Most examples are retrospective reports by parents. Unless corroborated by children, other family members, or observation, they should not be described as independently observed change.

The six candidate outcome domains can be stated as practical indicators for future evaluation.

- **Child emotional expression and self-regulation:** children name feelings, ask for time or support to calm down, or initiate reconnection.
- **Parent emotional regulation and communication:** parents pause, step away and return, or use feeling-language rather than scolding.
- **Co-parenting alignment:** parents share an ADHD-informed understanding, listen before giving solutions, or refer to common goals.
- **Communication carried into family life:** the family applies a more intentional way of talking after the facilitator leaves.
- **Parent understanding of the child:** parents revise an assumption or discover a child's hopes, preferences, or abilities.
- **Reflective rather than reactive parenting:** parents consider context and choose a response instead of reacting automatically.

These domains overlap. In particular, parent emotional regulation and reflective parenting may be related but should be distinguished in future measurement: the first concerns managing one's own emotional response, while the second concerns reflecting on the child's experience and choosing what to do. Families with stronger communication at baseline may describe new understanding of a child rather than additional communication change; an evaluation that counts only behaviour change could miss this form of perceived value.

DISCUSSION

The participant accounts suggest a plausible pathway through which Family Circles may be experienced as helpful—structured conversation creates opportunities to listen, gain new

perspectives, and try different responses. Families described perceived changes across the six candidate domains outlined in the findings. Some accounts offered concrete examples, such as a child asking for time to calm down or a parent choosing to pause rather than escalate. Other families described limited change, difficulty sustaining strategies at home, or a mismatch between programme content and their needs. For some families, the value was new insight into a child rather than a measurable change in established communication habits. These are participant-reported changes, not proof that Family Circles created the change as the data does not establish a causal mechanism or show which component led to which outcome.

A notable contribution of the findings is the distinction between a facilitator being neutral and being passive. Participants valued the facilitator's position outside the family relationship, but they also valued active skills such as managing turn-taking, engaging children, reframing, preparing families, and intervening when emotions rose. Neutrality appears most useful when paired with skilled, responsive facilitation and it should not be treated as detachment from the family's interaction.

The findings also point to a gap between in-session experience and everyday use. Participants could understand and appreciate strategies but found them difficult to apply under emotional pressure or sustain without follow-up. This is consistent with broader ADHD intervention literature that emphasises engagement, fit, implementation, and support across everyday settings rather than assuming that exposure to information will lead to reliable use (Chacko et al., 2024; Eiraldi et al., 2012). For Family Circles, the implication is not simply to add more teaching. Participants specifically described value in practice during sessions, coaching for applying strategies in difficult moments, and follow-up that is practical and proportionate to family needs.

The accounts challenge the assumption that emotional safety is a uniform property of the room. Safety could differ across relationships within the same session, and some participants needed time, preparation, or a different setting before they felt comfortable. The joint-family format in Family Circles was valued for creating shared understanding, but it could also inhibit disclosure where a participant did not feel ready to speak openly in front of another family member. A refined programme model should therefore treat safety as something facilitators continually assess and support.

Finally, participants described substantial variation in what they already knew about Family Circles and ADHD, and in their communication skills. They also differed in their children's ages and needs, family stress, communication patterns, and willingness to change routines. These differences, together with the programme components families received, shaped what each family sought from Family Circles. Some families focused on discovering children's perspectives because they felt their family already communicated well, while others worked on changing parental communication and regulation. The findings support exploring a flexible or tiered design – introductory material for families who need it; more advanced, application-focused sessions for families with prior knowledge; and different activity, setting, or follow-up options where needed.

Across the programme inputs, participants described different functions: workshops could build understanding, mentoring could help a child share or be seen differently, Family Circles could create a structured joint conversation, and behavioural tools could prompt reflection or discussion. These functions may complement one another, but the available accounts cannot establish their sequence, independent contribution, or causal effects because families received varied combinations and levels of exposure. Future evaluation should record which components each family received, when they received them, and how ready family members were to take part.

Implications for programme development

The findings suggest several areas to consider:

- **Assess fit and readiness:** learn about prior knowledge, family goals, child preferences, stressors, and comfort with joint discussion before selecting session content and format
- **Offer flexible formats:** consider age-appropriate, movement-friendly, outdoor, or neutral-venue options, as well as scheduling choices.
- **Strengthen preparation:** explain the session structure and commitment in advance, and consider sharing reflective questions before the session.
- **Support facilitation quality and continuity:** develop guidance for turn-taking, child engagement, emotional de-escalation, redirection, reframing, and facilitator handover.

- **Build in application and follow-up:** reserve time for family practice and agree on a feasible next step; consider brief check-ins or low-burden follow-up tools.
- **Measure distinct outcomes:** assess the six candidate domains separately from immediate session experience, and distinguish perceived insight, reported behaviour change, home use of strategies, and sustained change. Where feasible, combine parent and child accounts with follow-up or observational evidence.
- **Track programme exposure:** record each family's programme track, components received, attendance, sequence, and follow-up so future analyses can distinguish component exposure from family starting points.

Limitations

The findings reflect participant perceptions and retrospective accounts. Without baseline data, comparison groups, or longitudinal follow-up, they cannot establish that Family Circles caused reported changes or that changes were sustained. Parent accounts about children should not be presented as direct child perspectives unless supported by child data. Families received different combinations of workshops, mentoring, Family Circle sessions, and behavioural tools. This pilot study did not fully document the exposure and sequence of programme components so the analyses cannot isolate the contribution of each input or establish which combination works best. Finally, the examples include both positive and negative experiences; the report does not assume that the number of coded mentions represents the balance of opinion across all participating families. The sample was also small, particularly for The Builders Project (n=5), and post-programme feedback forms were available only for Project Kaleidoscope. Because one parent was interviewed in each family, the accounts may not reflect the views of other family members.

CONCLUSION

Participants described Family Circles as creating opportunities for family members to listen, speak, and encounter one another differently, particularly when facilitation combined a neutral position with clear structure and responsive support. Some families perceived changes in

understanding, communication, and connection. Others described limited transfer, poor fit, or experiences that were not helpful. Across accounts, perceived value depended on more than session content: readiness, safety, facilitator skill and continuity, family circumstances, and practical follow-up all mattered. These findings can refine LCCS's theory of change and evaluation framework, while further data are needed to assess the scale, durability, and causal contribution of reported changes.

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