

# Circles

Department of Family & Community  
Engagement

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## Roadmap of this Session

- Benefits of the Circle process
- Types of Circles
- Structure of a Circle
- Role of the Facilitator
- Resources to Support your practice

# Why Circles?

- Builds a culture of **belonging** and **community** through sharing of diverse life experiences and perspectives
- Develops **trust and sense of safety**, which enables learning
- Students learn how to participate in productive dialogues and communicate how they feel (**Social-Emotional Skills**)
- Creates the foundation and format for **problem solving**.



[https://youtu.be/tyYCQMY-M\\_k](https://youtu.be/tyYCQMY-M_k)



# What makes a circle a “Circle?”

A circle process is created through an *intentional structure* that is repeated for every circle

1. Opening
2. Creation or Review of Circle Agreements
3. Facilitator Shares the Purpose
4. Equal Opportunity to Share using Prompts and a Talking Piece
5. Closing

“In the Circle, we are all equal.  
No one is in front. No one is behind.  
No one is above. No one is below.  
We are all related - the circle  
creates unity.”

Quote from Dave Chief Ogalala Lakota



# Types of Circles



Proactive Circles

To build community, prevent conflict, and engage with curriculum



Responsive Circles

To share impact, repair harm, problem-solve, and make agreements for moving forward



Staff Circles

To build community, problem-solve, process situations and make decisions



# Proactive Circles

- Create shared expectations/class agreements
- Relationships/Belonging
- Check-in or check-out
- Make plans and decisions
- Engage with curriculum
- Debrief Incident



# Creating Class Expectations / Agreements

- **Different than Class Rules**
- **Created by and with students – “What do you need to be successful?” “What distracts from your learning?”**
  - Buy-in
  - Accountable to one another
- **When an expectation is not met, come back to circle:**
  - What happened?
  - How did the behavior impact you?
  - What should we do?
  - How can we prevent this from happening again?

# Building Relationships and Belonging

- Empathy
- Celebrate difference, and find commonalities
- Strong, safe relationships = ability to learn and take risks
- Opportunity to boost self-esteem through prompts
  - Name something you are good at
  - Describe what excites and interests you
  - Tell us about a time you were proud of yourself

# Check-in / Check-out

- **Quick way to gauge how your students are doing.**
  - One word to describe how you are feeling today
  - One thing you think you did well today
  - Something you are grateful for
  - Something that makes you nervous/anxious
  - One thing that will help you learn today
  - On a scale of 1-5, how prepared do you feel for the test? Name one thing that could help you feel more prepared.

# Making class plans and decisions

- Give students a voice and some freedom/power in their day
- Help you make the learning more relevant
- Allows you to hear from each student (especially important for those who aren't as likely to speak up)
- Ask students for input on:
  - Topics to cover
  - The order in which you do things
  - Ideas for creative projects
  - Ways to incorporate what they are learning into their community or future goals

# Engaging with the Curriculum

- Circles support active listening and discourage disrespectful behavior
- Circles support equal participation by all – sharing ideas, asking questions
- Circles allow for standing/movement

# Debriefing an Incident

Share feelings, ask questions, identify needs, figure out how to move forward

School lockdown

Violence in the neighborhood

Student or staff member injury or death

Large storm event...

# The Circle Structure

A circle process is created through an *intentional structure* that is repeated for every circle

1. Opening
2. Creation or Review of Circle Agreements
3. Facilitator Shares the Purpose
4. Equal Opportunity to Share using Prompts and a Talking Piece
5. Closing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdKhcQrLD1w>



# 1) Opening the Circle

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- Signals the creation of a different way of being together
- Sets the tone for the Circle
- A great way for students to participate in the facilitation of the circle
- Examples: Poem, song, moment of mindfulness, short reading, ritual





## 2) Circle Agreements

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- During the first circle, create agreements/guidelines for how you want to be together in circle.
  - Everyone should contribute, understand, and buy in.
  - Use a prompt to elicit ideas
  - Use a prompt to test understanding. *“What does respect mean to you?” What does listening look like to you?”*
- Every circle should revisit the agreements and ensure buy in
  - Create a poster?
- The facilitator ensures that the agreements are followed

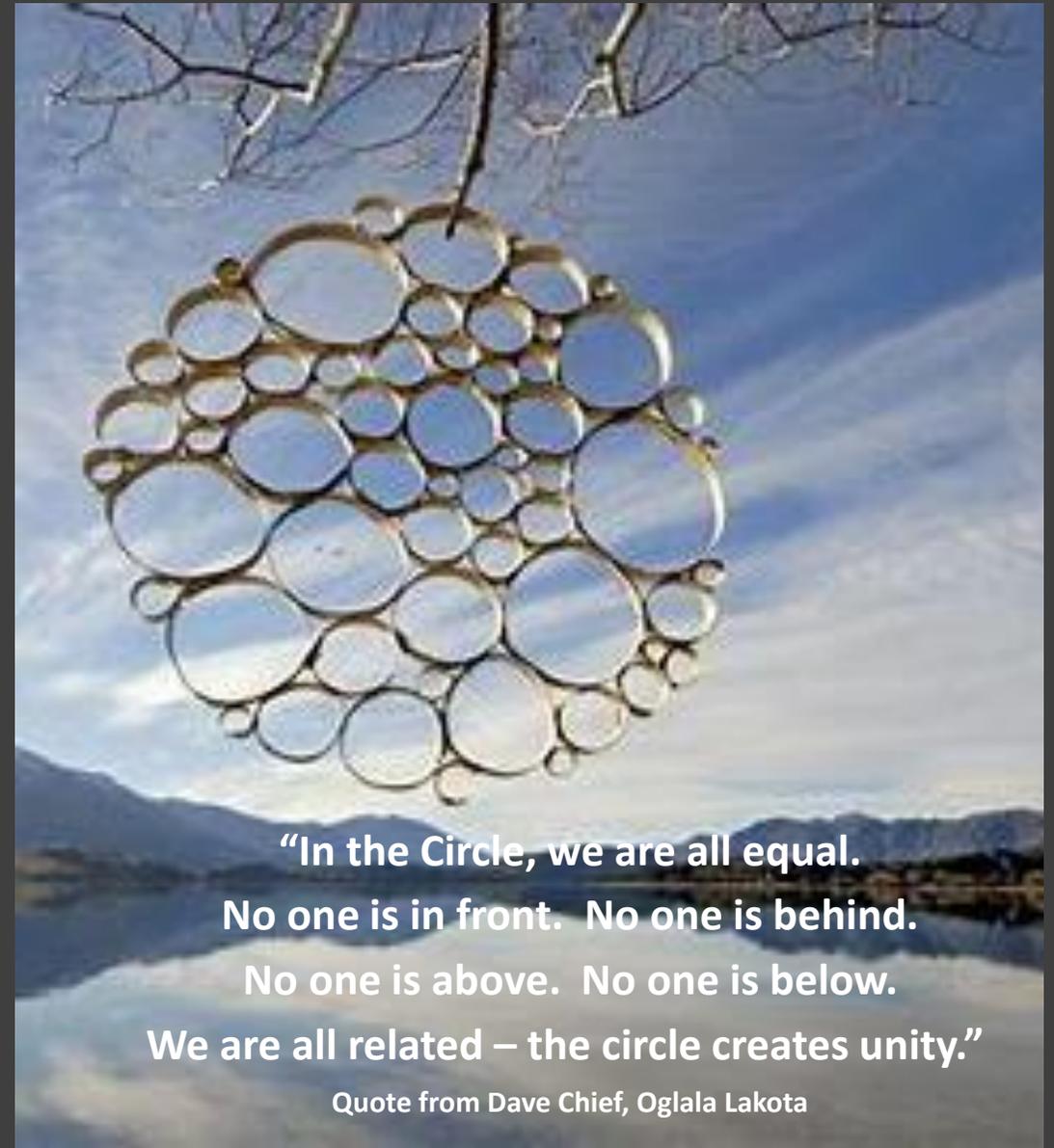
In this circle, we agree to these guidelines:

**Respect the Talking Piece:** Everyone listens, everyone has a turn to speak

**Speak and Listen from your Heart:** Share only your experience, feelings, and point of view

**Be Kind:** Be helpful, not hurtful

**Participate:** Work together, be involved



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# 3) Purpose

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Facilitator shares the purpose of that day's circle

- Getting to know one another / relationship-building
- Quick check-in
- Creating class agreements
- Making class decisions
- Problem-solving
- Debriefing an incident





## 4) Prompts for Sharing

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- Use a talking piece
- It takes time to develop trust and comfort with sharing – start with “light, low-stakes” prompts, until students feel comfortable moving deeper.
- Plan ahead for the allotted time
- Share first to set the tone
- Don’t re-create the wheel
- Get input from students
- Opportunity to use prompts that reinforce self-esteem, gratitude, care for others, empathy, etc

# 5) Closing

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- Signals the end of the circle process
- Sets the tone
- Great opportunity for students to lead
- Examples – Poem, Reading, Song, Moment of Gratitude or Mindfulness, Movement, Ritual, Sharing of Goals or Intentions



# Role of Facilitator

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- Prepare
- Set the tone
- Follow the agenda
- Monitor Circle Agreements
- Monitor well-being of Participants
- Offer encouragement and support



What about students who disrupt a circle?

First - Ask for cooperation, Remind them of Circle Agreements

If that doesn't work - Ask them to step out of the circle, either as a quiet observer or if that's not possible, outside of the class.

Let the circle continue

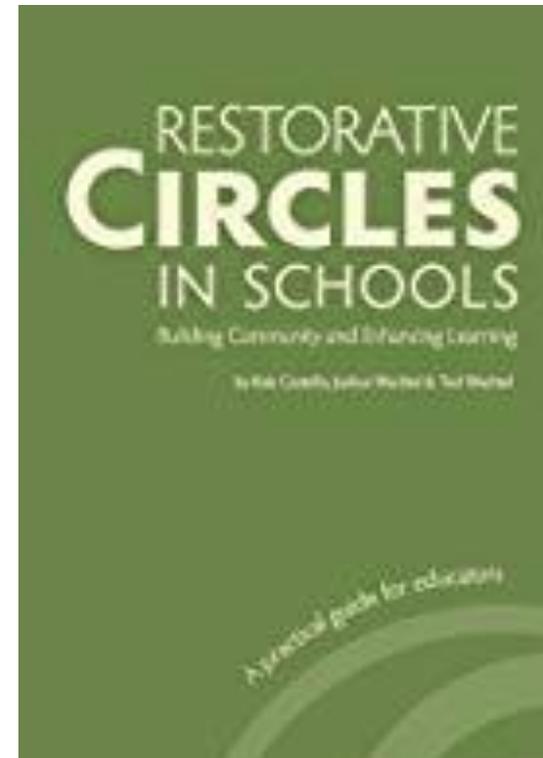
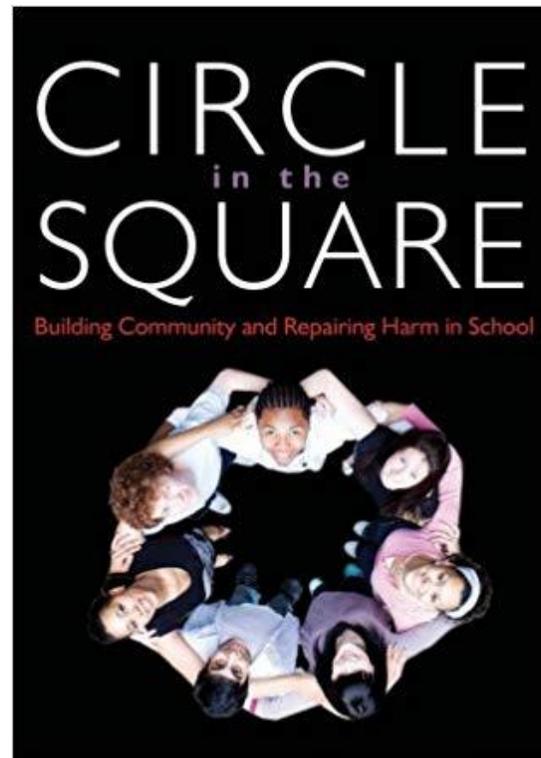
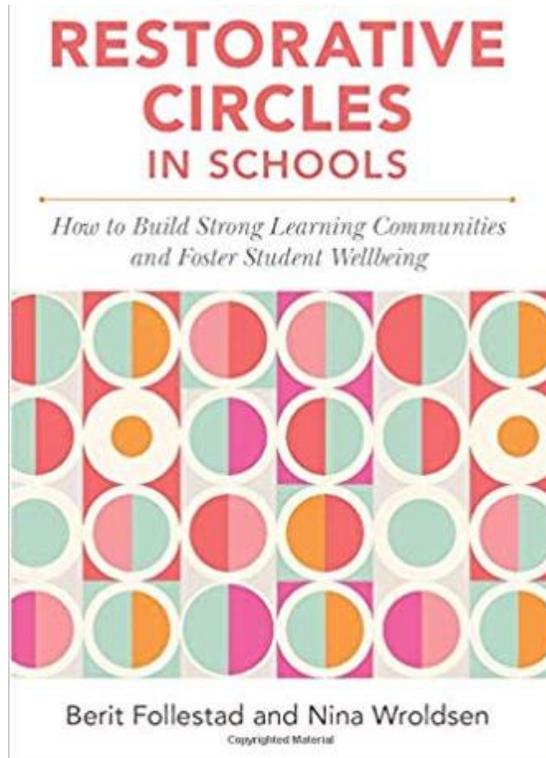
What about students who refuse to participate?

Let them sit outside the circle and observe; peer pressure hopefully encourages them to join

Individual follow-up conversation to explore their barriers to participating

**IF YOU ARE  
PERSISTENT,  
YOU WILL GET IT.  
IF YOU ARE  
CONSISTENT,  
YOU WILL KEEP IT.**





[Family Engagement / Resources for  
Schools \(spokaneschools.org\)](https://spokaneschools.org)