

Circles

Department of Family & Community
Engagement
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Restorative Practices is all about relationships.

Icebreaker exercise to connect: (mingling pairs, groups, circle share)

- Name, position/school
- When do you feel most energized in your work?
- What gifts do you bring to the students and colleagues that you work with? What makes you a good teacher/colleague?
- Describe your perfect Saturday
- Something you've always wanted to learn how to do

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**.



Why Circles?

Sharing of diverse life experiences and perspectives

- Builds empathy
- Meets our basic human need for belonging. Meeting this need helps prevent conflict.

Sharing Builds trust and sense of safety –

- Creates emotional bonds and in turn a sense of safety and trust.
- When students feel safe, they can get out of their survival brains and into their thinking brain. This enables learning to occur. This is especially relevant for students who have or are experiencing trauma and high levels of stress and anxiety.

The Circle Process teaches and allows students to practice social and emotional skills

- Research shows that social and emotional skills are highly correlated with not just academic success, but with overall life success
- Skills like:
 - Listening
 - Patience while taking turns
 - Expressing feelings

- Empathy

Regular Circles create a foundation of trust, empathy and social/emotional skills that both prevent conflicts and that allow for productive and peaceful problem-solving when things don't go well.

- For example, imagine that one of your students is rude to another student when they are entering the classroom (maybe they give them a mean look or brush them off); that *could* lead to an altercation. But, if those students have been in regular circles together where they have shared their life experiences, maybe how they express stress, maybe what's going on under the surface, those students are more likely to demonstrate empathy and are less likely to form judgments and jump to conclusions. They are also more likely to express themselves with words.
- The relationships that are created through regular circles can prevent conflicts from escalating.

https://youtu.be/tyYCQMY-M_k



video: 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



A Circle Process ensures that every participant has an equal opportunity to contribute. This allows us as educators to learn more about each of our students, including those who shy away from speaking and raising their hands. The more we know about our students, the better we can understand the root causes of their behavior and tailor our teaching strategies to their unique needs and gifts.

The other benefit that comes from the shape and structure of a circle is that it balances the power dynamic between student and teacher, and among students. In the Circle, a dynamic is created where everyone is a teacher and everyone is a student.

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

Ideally, 80% of Circles should be Proactive, 20% Responsive. A regular proactive Circle practice will create a strong foundation for using Circles to resolve conflict. **For more information on *Responsive Circles*, see the Handout called “Responsive Circles” at [Family Engagement / Resources for Schools \(spokaneschools.org\)](http://Family Engagement / Resources for Schools (spokaneschools.org)).**

Proactive Circles:

- Building community
- Engaging with curriculum
- Student input in decision-making
- Processing incidents

Responsive Circles: (after conflict, a broken agreement, or harm)

- Share impact
- Repair harm / rebuild relationships
- Problem solve
- Make agreements

Staff Circles

Circles aren't just for students!

- building community
- brainstorming/sharing ideas,

- making decisions,
- resolving conflict, etc.



Proactive Circles

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

Circles are versatile. Once your students are comfortable being in Circle, the possibilities are endless

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?

- How are agreements different than rules?
- Every student provides input into what the agreements should be. You could use prompts like, “What do you need to be successful in class?” Or “What distracts you from learning or feeling calm?”
- Every student should understand what the agreements mean. You could use prompts to ensure understanding, like.....”You all agreed that respect should be in our class agreements. What does respect mean to you? What does respect look like? Why is this important to you? How do you show respect to others? How do you show respect to yourself?”
- Every student should agree to the class agreements.
- When the agreement is broken, come back in a circle and process/problem solve using prompts like: “What happened? How did that behavior impact you? What should we do?” Because the students created the agreements, they buy-in, and they should participate in holding one another accountable.

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

Start with “low stakes” prompts to build trust. Favorite color, favorite food, etc. Once trust is built, you can begin to dive deeper.

Use prompts that focus on “who” your students are, not “what” they do. For example, “What makes you a good friend.” Prompts can be used to cultivate the qualities we hope to bring out in our students (kindness, empathy, confidence, courage, grit, etc).

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.

Helps you know what is going on with your students so that you can anticipate and respond to needs

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

A Circle Process can be used during academic lessons. By doing so, every student will have an equal opportunity to participate and circle agreements will support taking turns, listening, respect, etc.

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...

When something happens in school or the community that you know is on the minds of your students and is potentially getting in the way of their ability to focus or actively participate in learning, then a Circle Process can be used to process this event so that you can move forward with learning.

Students can share the impact that this had on them, ask questions to clarify misunderstandings, and identify what they need to move forward.

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

No matter what “type” of circle you are facilitating, the same structure should be followed.

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



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1) Opening the Circle

- 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

- 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

Circle Agreements are essentially groundrules for how you want to treat one another in circle

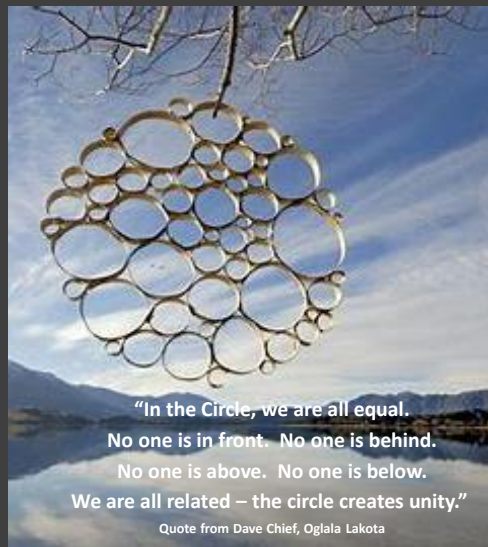
In this circle, we agree to these guidelines:

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



Here are some sample Circle Agreements

3) Purpose

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



After the Opening and the review of the Circle Agreements, the facilitator should share the purpose of the Circle. All of the Circle prompts should flow from this purpose.



4) Prompts for Sharing

- 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

Prompts are simply open-ended questions that each person answers as the talking piece moves around the circle.

For example, as a facilitator of a circle I would hold the talking piece, which can be anything of meaning (stuffed animal of the school mascot, a pen, a rock) and I would say, “Share a time when you felt most proud of yourself” and then I would answer the question and pass the talking piece to the person next to me. Each person would answer until the talking piece got back to me, and I would present another prompt “Share a time when you helped someone and how that made you feel.” This continues until it is time to close the Circle.

As the facilitator, you can set the tone through your response. If you are vulnerable, then others are more likely to be vulnerable.

A few tips on choosing prompts

- Plan ahead! Ensure that time = equal opportunity to share. You never want to run out of time before everyone has had an opportunity to share.
- Don’t re-create the wheel (lots of resources out there that have sample

prompts)

- Get input from students (have students write down a possible prompt and gather them in a basket)
- It takes time to develop trust and comfort with sharing – start with “light, low-stakes” prompts, until students feel comfortable moving deeper.
- Focus prompts on “who” your students are, not on what they “do.”
- Use prompts that cultivate positive qualities in your students

5) Closing

- 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

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



See the Circle Planning Worksheet on the Restorative Practices Webpage: [Family Engagement / Resources for Schools \(spokaneschools.org\)](https://spokaneschools.org/family-engagement/resources-for-schools)

What about students who disrupt a circle?

First - Ask for cooperation, Remind them of Circle Agreements

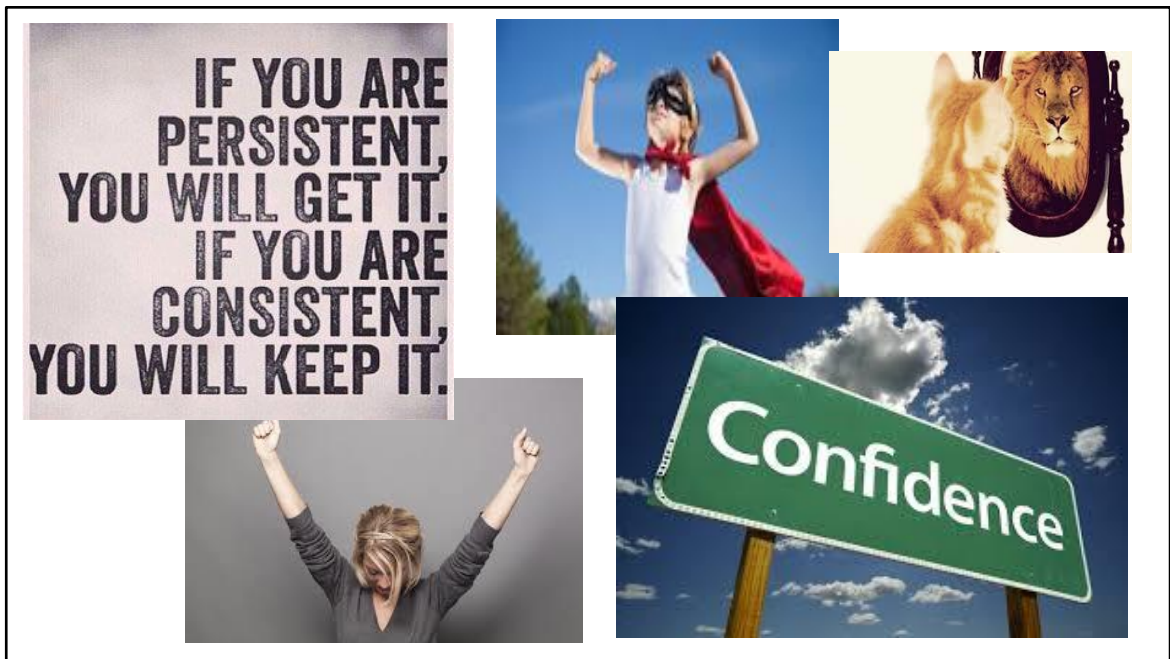
If that doesn't work - Ask them to step out of the circle, either as a quiet observer or if that's not possible, outside of the class.

Let the circle continue

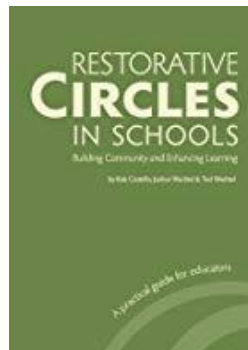
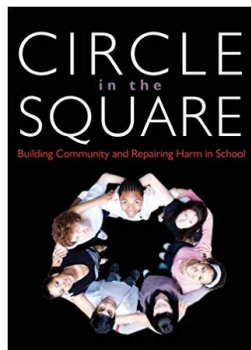
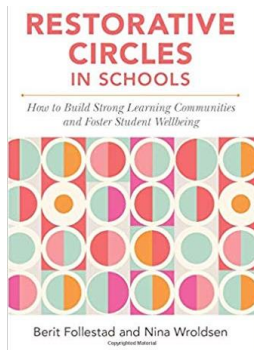
What about students who refuse to participate?

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



The more confident you are, the more comfortable your students will be!
Ask a peer to co-facilitate, ask a student leader to co-facilitate
Contact Julie Schaffer at Juliesc@spokaneschools.org for support and/or to model a circle with your students.
The more you do it, the more comfortable it will become!



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

The Restorative Practices Webpage has a book list, as well as handouts, videos, and powerpoints! [Family Engagement / Resources for Schools \(spokaneschools.org\)](http://spokaneschools.org)