

# Circles



Adapted from San Francisco United School District

**Intentionally creating a space that lifts barriers between people, circles open the possibility for connection, collaboration, and mutual understanding.**

**Derived from aboriginal and native traditions, circles are built on caring relationships, positive expectation messages, and opportunities for meaningful participation.**

Circle processes are a valuable practice that serves numerous purposes in our school communities.

**Participants gain valuable life skills that will not only positively contribute to improved interpersonal relationships and academic success, but will also prepare them for their future endeavors and relationships.**

The circle process provides a way of bringing people together in which:

- Everyone is respected and gets a chance to talk without interruption
- Participants explain themselves by telling their stories
- Everyone is equal- no person is more important than anyone else
- Emotional aspects of individual experiences are welcome

## Values and Principles of the Circle and Community

*Circles are a special process that needs to be presented as such. It's extremely important to set the tone and expectation of the circle to reflect the core values upon which it is based each and every time a circle forms. These values are what distinguish circle time from all other time. If used consistently, the values that govern the success of the circle, and foster the relationship building and skill development will eventually spread out of the circle into the greater community.*

## Typical Circle Structure:

1. Chairs are placed in a physical circle, enough chairs for all participating members with no additional furniture blocking any participants
2. The facilitator is called the "keeper", and leads the meeting (may possibly be lead by a student)
3. The keeper makes introductory comments, often including a discussion of the values that guide the success of the process, and may place the written values/positive agreements on the floor in the middle of the circle for all participants to see.
4. The keeper poses a question or topic (of which depends on the purpose of the circle)
5. A talking piece is introduced and passed, usually clockwise around the circle
6. The only person authorized to speak is the person holding the talking piece (one person at a time), participants may choose not to speak if they wish
7. When a person is finished speaking, they pass the talking piece onwards to the next person

8. The process of passing the talking piece around the circle may continue for a number of rounds. Since only one person speaks at a time, it's important to offer participants a chance to reflect on what the others are saying in the circle.

## **General Circle Format:**

This format can be amended depending on the amount of time or topic. While it can be tempting to skip the guidelines and values round, it is important that you do not unless you are in a group that has been meeting in a circle for a while and have covered values in previous circles. A reoccurring group should always revisit the guidelines and values even if just briefly.

1. Opening
2. Guidelines / Values
3. Introduction of Talking Piece
4. Check-In
5. Discussion Rounds
6. Check out
7. Closing

### **1. Opening**

**Purpose:** to create a special or sacred space where everyone will come together to share in ways we ordinarily don't have the opportunity to do. Also to ground everyone, set a positive tone for participants to transition into the circle process.

**Examples of an opening:** poems, quotes, guided meditation or breathing exercise

**Suggested opening language:** "We have come together today to learn more about one another and to be together in a way which will make our school community (or our class or group) stronger, closer and safer."

### **2. Guidelines**

**Purpose:** to allow Circle participants to identify and agree upon shared guidelines for the circle. It's very important to convey the importance of, and hold participants accountable to the guidelines as they directly impact the success of the circle.

**Circle guidelines:**

- **Respect the talking piece: everyone listens, everyone has a turn**
- **Speak from the heart: your truth, your perspectives, your experiences**
- **Listen from the heart: let go of stories that make it hard to hear each other**
- **Trust that you will know what to say: no need to rehearse**
- **Say just enough: without feeling rushed, be concise and considerate of the time of others.**

**Suggested guideline language:** "Here are the core circle guidelines. Are there any other guidelines you would like to add?" Pass the talking piece around the circle and chart any other guidelines.

**Values:** Circle participants identify and agree upon personal and shared group values which everyone will honor during the circle. Note: The traditional way is to ask people to bring their "best selves" to the discussion. Values are a reminder for how to 'be' in Circle. Respect, honesty, trustworthiness, courage, are examples of such values.

### **3. Introduction of the Talking Piece**

**Purpose:** to create an equitable environment for sharing. Everyone gets a chance to speak or have the right to pass. For those that do not have the talking piece, it is an opportunity to actively listen to the speaker.

Sometimes the talking piece may be suspended to encourage spontaneous sharing or brainstorming.

**Example of a talking piece:** Sacred or meaningful objects that community members can relate to or something that has meaning to someone or is relevant to the topic to be discussed. (Stuffed animal, rock, stone, etc.)

**Suggested language:** The person holding the talking piece is the only one who may speak. Everyone else in the circle is actively listening and trying not to spend time thinking about what they are going to say.

The talking piece usually moves in a circular format (clockwise or counter clockwise). Every person has the opportunity to speak and the right to pass if they choose. Even though someone may pass, they must still be present and participate.

### **4. Check-In**

**Purpose:** to invite participants to talk about how they are feeling on physical, mental or emotional levels at the moment.

**Suggested check in language:** Q: Name one word describing how you are feeling? If you could be a weather pattern, what pattern would describe how you are feeling right now (today)?

### **5. Discussion Rounds**

**Purpose:** choosing a topic that is appropriate for the group to discuss will directly impact the success of the circle.

If this is a new group and you are just getting to know each other, you may ask people to share what is important to them about being in this community.

- A good prompting question for a circle will allow people to speak from a personal perspective about something that relates to the group. After asking a question that allows people to tell a story, you may ask a question that encourages people to speak about the issue or reason they were brought into the circle today (community building, celebration, general check in, current event etc.)

### **6. Check out**

**Purpose:** To invite participants to express how they are feeling at this moment as the circle is about to end.

**Suggested check out language:** Share one word about how they are feeling at the end of the Circle or about what they most appreciated about the process.

### **7. Closing**

**Purpose:** To close the circle with intention and allow participants to re-enter the world and acknowledge the work done in circle.

**Examples of a closing:** poems, quotes, do a guided meditation or breathing exercise, etc..

- You may suggest that everyone stand shoulder to shoulder and take three deep breaths together. You may also read a short poem or quote and with an expression of gratitude to all present for their participation.

### **Role of Circle Keeper:**

Circle keepers are the caretaker of the circle process, they are not facilitators. As a keeper, it is your job to ensure that everyone takes responsibility for making the circle a welcoming, safe place for open dialogue. Very often, and usually unconsciously, participants will situate the keeper as an authority figure, looking to him or her to direct or make decisions for the group. When it seems the process isn't going smoothly or is taking a direction different than you imagined, it is important to remember that your role is merely to guide the group. It is your job to introduce questions that empower the group to do the work they need to do. As soon as you intervene in a more directive way, participants become less accountable for their actions and decisions. Resulting agreements become much less a reflection of their process and needs and more about what you think the group needs.

### **Circle Keepers:<sup>1</sup>**

- Do not control the circle but help participants uphold its integrity.
- Help to hold a space that is clear, open, respectful, and free. This means knowing when/how to interrupt, when to open and close the circle, when to take a break, and how to remind people to adhere to the agreed-upon guidelines.
- Are participants in the circle, not observers
- Don't need to be a mediator or group facilitator in the usual sense; it's not a position of power, but it is a responsibility to others to keep to the values of the circle.

### **Suggested language for circle keepers:**

**Promote Equality;** "We all have important experiences and something to offer."

**Generate Respect;** "We are different but we all have something to learn from each other."

**Share Responsibility;** "We all have a responsibility for finding solutions."

**Encourage New Ideas;** "Every idea is a good one. We work together to find solutions."

**Seek Solutions that Benefit Everyone;** "Can we find a way to meet the needs of all involved today?"

**Maintain Positive Perspective;** "This is difficult work, and at the same time, we are moving toward a positive outcome."

### **The Talking Piece:**

- Is an object of focus accepted and used by the group. Often something is used that has special meaning to the group.
- Provides greater opportunity for listening and reflection since a person has to wait for the talking piece to come around before speaking. Participants tend to focus more on what people are saying than on preparing an immediate response.
- Prevents one-on-one debates since people cannot respond out of turn.
- Encourages shared responsibility for discussion.

- Reinforces equality in the circle since it provides equal opportunity for all to participate.
- Provides more opportunity for those who are often silent to be heard since they don't have to compete with those who are more verbal.

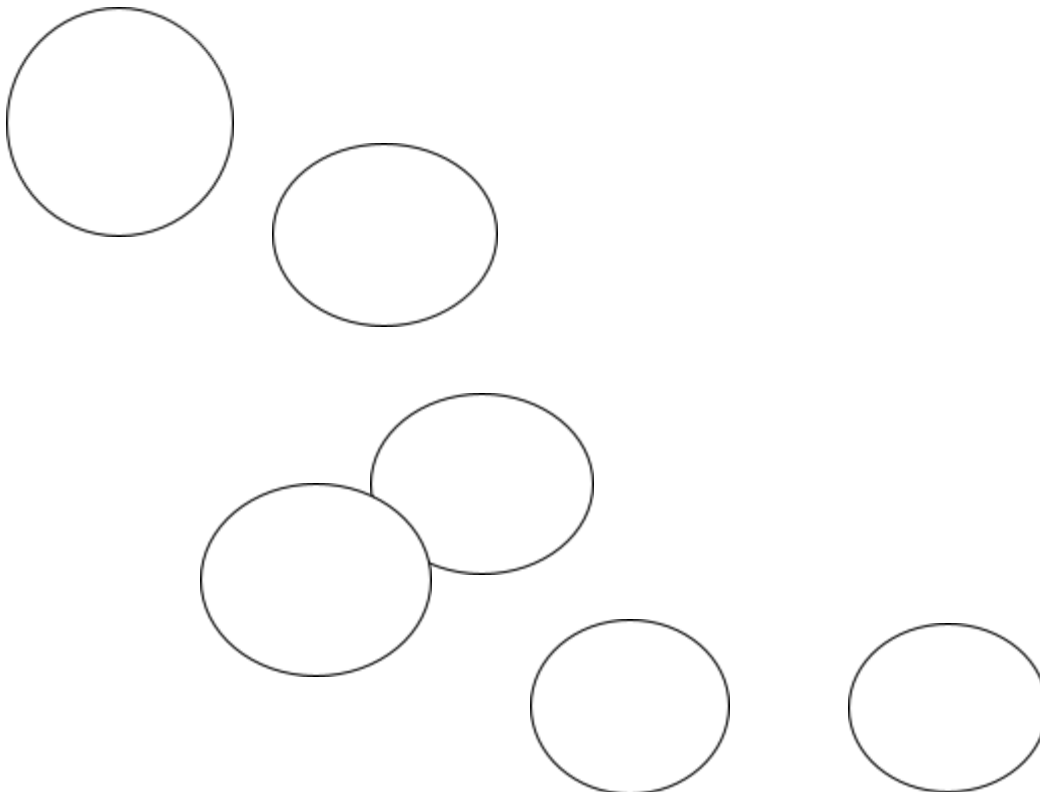
**Time:**

Circles can form for as little as 10 minutes through an entire class period depending on the need and purpose for the circle.

**When to Use Circles:**

Depending on the need to bring people together, circles will serve different purposes. Always guided by the same values and principles, circles may be called for:

community building	problem-solving	reflecting	introducing new students
Conflict resolution	brainstorming	support	farewell to students leaving
healing	diffusing tension	family issues	community violence debriefing



# Community Building: Proactive Circles

Circles foster attentive listening, empathy, sharing, and equal opportunities of participation for all members, therefore, the circle process helps cultivate a strong sense of belonging.

## Proactive Circles:<sup>2</sup>

- Provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors.
- Are NOT held in response to an incident or problem.
- Ideally should account for no less than 80 percent of all circles a student experiences.
- Are based on topics intentionally selected and sequenced to increase risk-taking over time.
- Build the social capital necessary to support successful Responsive Circles.
- Are used to set up behavioral expectations prior to events that occur outside the regular classroom.
- Can be used to help students with academic goal setting and planning.
- Can be used to set ground rules for projects and activities.
- Can be used to build or monitor understanding of academic content.

## Examples of Proactive Circles

**Beginning-of-day/class circles:** (adopted from the Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools)

Circles at the beginning of each day/class can help develop common understandings of guidelines, expectations, and values. They can also be used to address tensions or problems that may have arisen the day before. A daily circle process provides a chance to check in with questions or issues such as:

- How was your night? (High risk question)
- What's going on in your life right now? (High risk question)
- What are your thoughts or reflections on today's assignment?
- Clarifying details and expectations of daily schedules.

**Anytime circles:** (adopted from the Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools)

Circles can be used at any point when tensions or problems have arisen, or when decisions need to be made. They provide a problem-solving forum that teaches values such as honesty, accountability, responsibility, and compassion.

Possible uses include:

- **Curriculum:** enhance learning by providing an interactive forum for students to participate in the learning process. Examples include, content review, reading debriefs, topic discussions, goal setting, news articles, current events, books, controversial topics.
- **Having fun** or doing a cooperative activity such as telling jokes and story telling.
- Engaging in **student-chosen discussion** topics.
- **Student/Family/Parent Support/ Staff Support:** truancy, IEP, suspension reentry, peace circles (requested by students who need a safe place to vent emotion and receive support), parent meetings, staff meetings...etc.

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<sup>2</sup> The International Institute for Restorative Practices: Whole School Implementation overview and essential elements

**End-of-day circles:** (adopted from the Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools)

- Circles are often used at the end of the day for purposes such as these:
- To share something that happened to each participant that day.
- To address a problem or conflict that has arisen during the day
- To address feelings and tensions that may have developed inside the classroom, in other areas of the school, or even in the outside world (ex. Disturbing events in the news).

## **Sample Prompting Questions/Topics for Circles**

*Please note:* It is always important to carefully select which questions or topics to pose to the group depending on the needs of the group. The health of each member of the circle is always to be strongly considered.

\*Be prepared and know that some of the circle prompts may bring up a lot of emotions for the circle members.

### **Getting Acquainted**

- Share a happy childhood memory.
- If you could be a superhero, what super powers would you choose and why?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What would you not want to change about your life?
- If you could talk to someone from your family who is no longer alive, who would it be and why?
- If you had an unexpected free day, what would you like to do?
- If you were an animal, what animal would you be and why?
- Name two things or people who always make you laugh.
- I like to collect....
- If you could have a face to face conversation with anyone, who would it be and why?
- Describe your ideal job.
- Describe your favorite vacation.
- If you could change anything about yourself what would it be?

### **Exploring Values**

- Imagine you are in conflict with a person who is important in your life. What values do you want to guide your conduct as you try to work out that conflict?
- What is your passion?
- What do you keep returning to in your life?
- What touches your heart?
- What gives you hope?
- What demonstrates respect?
- What change would you like to see in your community? What can you do to promote that change?

- A time when you acted on your core values even though others were not.

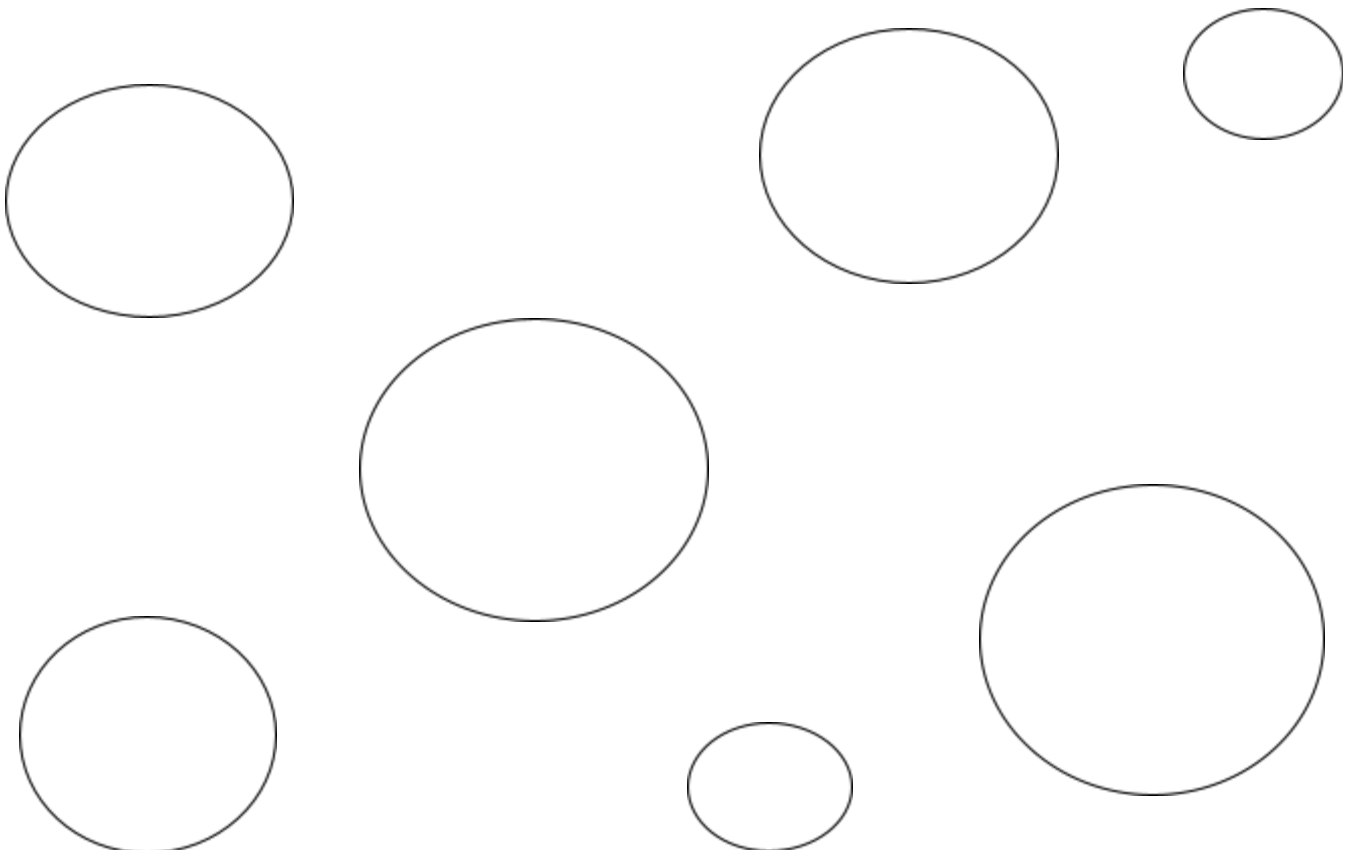
**Storytelling from our lives to share who we are and what has shaped us (to build community)**

Invite participants to share:

- A time when you were outside of your comfort zone
- An experience in your life when you “made lemonade out of lemons”.
- An experience of transformation when, out of a crisis or difficulty, you discovered a gift in your life.
- An experience of causing harm to someone and then dealing with it in a way you felt good about.
- An experience of letting go of anger or resentment.
- A time when you were in conflict with your parents or caregiver.
- An experience where you discovered that someone was very different from the negative assumptions you first made about that person.
- An experience of feeling that you did not fit in.

**Relating to Curriculum:**

- The best/worst thing about this science project is...
- The main character in the book we are reading is like/not like me when...
- These math problems make me feel...





## Additional Circle Starters:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I feel happy when...</li><li>2. I feel sad when...</li><li>3. I feel angry when...</li><li>4. I feel scared when...</li><li>5. I feel excited when...</li><li>6. I feel stressed when...</li><li>7. I feel alone when...</li><li>8. The scariest thing...</li><li>9. My favorite hobby...</li><li>10. My favorite pet...</li><li>11. My favorite food is...</li><li>12. My favorite T.V. show is...</li><li>13. My favorite weekend activity is...</li><li>14. My favorite song is...</li><li>15. My favorite sport is...</li><li>16. My favorite color is...</li><li>17. My favorite weather is...</li><li>18. Rain makes me feel...</li><li>19. Wind makes me feel...</li><li>20. Sunshine makes me feel...</li><li>21. I feel happy when...</li><li>22. I feel sad when...</li><li>23. I feel angry when...</li><li>24. I feel scared when...</li><li>25. I feel excited when...</li><li>26. I feel stressed when...</li><li>27. I feel alone when...</li><li>28. The scariest thing...</li><li>29. My favorite hobby...</li><li>30. My favorite pet...</li><li>31. My favorite food is...</li><li>32. My favorite T.V. show is...</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>33. My favorite weekend activity is...</li><li>34. My favorite song is...</li><li>35. My favorite sport is...</li><li>36. My favorite color is...</li><li>37. My favorite weather is...</li><li>38. Rain makes me feel...</li><li>39. Wind makes me feel...</li><li>40. Sunshine makes me feel...</li><li>41. Snow makes me feel...</li><li>42. Fog makes me feel...</li><li>43. Today I feel...</li><li>44. When I think of blue, I think of...</li><li>45. When I think of red, I think of...</li><li>46. When I think of green, I think of...</li><li>47. When I think of yellow, I think of...</li><li>48. When I think of black, I think of...</li><li>49. When I think of brown, I think of...</li><li>50. When I think of white, I think of...</li><li>51. If I were an animal, I would be...</li><li>52. If I were a famous actor/actress, I would be ...</li><li>53. If I were a famous athlete, I would be...</li><li>54. When I graduate from high school, I want to ...</li><li>55. When I become an adult, I want to...</li><li>56. When I start my career, I want to ...</li><li>57. I can't wait until...</li><li>58. Friends are ...</li><li>59. Families are...</li><li>60. Putdowns make me feel...</li><li>61. Appreciations make me feel...</li></ol> |
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\*\*This material is adopted from Kristi Cole and Paul Dedinsky's packet of Restorative Justice Practices, Milwaukee Public Schools. Safe Schools/Healthy Students.

# Circle Planning Guide

**1. What is the purpose or goal of your circle?** (ex. Community building, check-in, address specific classroom issue, curriculum/content...etc.)

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**2. Circle Introduction:** [How will you introduce and convey the reason for the circle to the participants?]

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**3. Establish core guidelines:** (What are the core guidelines you would like to introduce to the participants? What additional questions will you ask to create shared guidelines and values? Do you have them written on a poster board for all to see?)

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**4. Opening** (How will you open the circle? A poem, quote, song, breathing, story...?)

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**5. Introduction of Talking Piece.** [What object are you using and Why?]

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**6. Check-In** [What question will you ask for the initial check-in round? ex. On a scale of 1-10, today I am a .....]

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**7. Discussion Rounds** [What needs to be addressed in the circle? What questions will you ask?

How many rounds will you facilitate?

To consider: Are the questions you are asking high or low risk?

Does the question directly or indirectly address the goal and purpose for the circle?

What are some potential challenges that may surface? How will you handle them?

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**8. Check out** [What question do you want to present to bring closure to the circle? ex. how are people feeling right now?]

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**9. Closing** [How will you close the circle, praise and celebrate the participation of the circle members? poem, quote, song, breathing, story...?]

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## **Additional Resources**

[101 Circle Prompts](#)

[Morning Meetings: Creating a Safe Space for Learning](#) (video)

[Circle Keeper's Handbook](#)

[Dialogue Circles and positive classroom culture](#)

[Circles at Armadale](#) (10 days of scripted circles)

[Restorative Practices Guide & Toolkit CPS](#)

[Class Meetings: A Democratic Approach to Classroom Management](#)

[Values for a Trauma-Informed Care Culture in Your Classroom and School](#)

[Speaking Up Without Tearing Down](#) (in classrooms)

[A Teacher's Guide to Anxiety in the Classroom](#)