

# Circles: Building Community and Academic Engagement

Circles are versatile tools for fostering connection, building community, and supporting academic learning across all grade levels.

## What Are Circles?

Circles provide a safe, inclusive space for building community, enhancing academic learning, and resolving conflicts through structured discussions. At Tier 1, they are universally used to foster belonging, collaboration, and mutual respect in the classroom. For students requiring extra support at Tier 2, circles are tailored to address shared academic or behavioral concerns in small groups, creating opportunities for connection and problem-solving. At Tier 3, they are carefully facilitated to address significant harm, support reentry, or resolve complex conflicts, helping rebuild trust and relationships.

## Why Use Circles?

**Fosters Belonging & Respect:** Provides a safe, inclusive environment for all learners.

**Deepens Academic Engagement:** Encourages collaborative discussions and critical thinking.

**Constructive Conflict Resolution:** Offers a proactive way to address and repair harm.

**Builds Empathy & Communication:** Strengthens key social-emotional skills among students.

**Versatile & Adaptable:** Suitable for morning meetings, academic discussions, or SEL activities.



## The Research Says:

- » **Hattie's Visible Learning:** Classroom discussions have an effect size of 0.82, showing their significant impact on learning and collaboration.
- » Circles align with CASEL's SEL framework, fostering emotional intelligence and reducing conflict.

# Steps for Using Circles

## 1. Start with a Purpose:

- » Identify the goal of the circle: community-building, academic learning, or conflict resolution.
- » Example: Use a circle to discuss a novel's theme, reflect on the week, or repair a relationship.

## 2. Set the Tone:

- » Choose a neutral space and establish clear guidelines for respectful participation.
- » Use an opening prompt or question to focus the group.

## 3. Facilitate Open Discussion:

- » Encourage every participant to share their thoughts without interruption.
- » Use prompts that align with the circle's purpose, such as:
  - "What's one way you contributed positively to our class community this week?"
  - "What connections can you make between today's lesson and real-world problems?"

## 4. Collaborate and Reflect:

- » For academic circles, summarize key insights or connections.
- » For conflict resolution, agree on actionable steps to repair harm and move forward.

## 5. Close Positively:

- » End with a reflection or appreciation to reinforce trust and collaboration.
- » Example: "What's one thing you're grateful for about today's discussion?"

## Signs of Effective Circles

- » Students actively participate and respect the circle's process.
- » Academic circles enhance understanding and engagement with learning topics.
- » Morning Meetings and SEL connections foster emotional growth.
- » Conflicts are resolved constructively, with mutual agreements upheld.

## Questions for Reflection

- » How can circles become a consistent part of your classroom routines?
- » What academic or SEL topics could benefit from circle discussions?
- » How can circles be adapted to align with your students' needs and classroom goals?