

Community Circle

Overview:

A Community Building Circle, also sometimes referred to as a Peace Circle, is a structured process of communication that brings people together and helps participants connect with a mindful appreciation that honors the uniqueness of all those involved. Relationship building is the primary focus of the circle, and it is a process that can be used in any setting, giving equal voice to participants and valuing the contributions of all. The practice includes a physical arrangement of participants in a circle, designated facilitators, a stated purpose/focus, circle guidelines, a circle center piece, and a talking piece. The structure of communication is organized into rounds, with an opening and a closing included.

Purpose:

Community Building Circles are one example of a proactive restorative practice that can both build and strengthen relationships. They are a powerful tool for building a positive school and classroom climate. Once the participants are able to establish common values, guidelines, and a safe space for expressing opinions in a classroom community, it becomes easy to use the same process for conflict resolution, academic instruction, and more. Students feel empowered to learn tools to manage their own behavior, listen respectfully to one another, understand that everyone in the classroom has a valued voice, and respectfully advocate for self and others. Teachers benefit because behavioral interruptions decrease, students are happier and more focused on learning, and the level of cooperation and partnership between teachers and students increase.

The Community Building Circle process is drawn directly from the tradition of the Talking Circle of the indigenous peoples of North America. It has been, and still is, used by many indigenous people around the world. We are deeply indebted to those who have kept these traditions alive and so appreciate the wisdom and inspiration that has come with those practices (Pranis, 2005).

Application: When and where can I use it?

Community Circles can work with intentional planning, introduction, and modeling in any grade K-12, and can be started at any point. However, it is best to incorporate this into classroom community building in the fall or beginning of a new semester, as you co-create norms and routines with students. Lean on staff formally trained within the building to model and co-lead your first few circles with you, if desired. As with any new routine, work to explain procedures, model directly, and address expectations consistently.

In a school context, there are three major purposes for community circles (ASCD, 2022):

- Contribute to a positive classroom and school culture that values voice and choice and ensures learning
- Assist students in working through issues and situations that affect their classroom experience academically and socially, whether directly or indirectly
- Build the capacity of classroom and school communities to arrive at a consensus, make decisions, and take action

Remember the 80/20 rule of Restorative Practices. 80% of community circles in classroom should be proactive with the purpose of building connections and having fun as a group. 20% or less should be for problem solving and conflict repair.

Getting Started: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Community Circles are a high leverage instructional tool to use at the start of the school year, or a new course with new students coming together in a learning environment. Share the purpose with students, including how it connects not only to building a strong community, but to problem solving, and deeper academic learning. You might use language such as: "Community Circles are a helpful format for us to use as a classroom community to ensure space and time to build connections to each other, lift every voice, problem solve, and have fun together, too."

Depending on the prompts and number of rounds, circles take an average from 20-40 minutes. It takes thoughtful modeling and facilitation with large groups of students to fit a circle into a single class period, but it can be done!

It is helpful to use the first circle to generate circle values. Build in this work to the prompts for each round. (Examples: Place an index card and marker at each seat. Have each participant think of a value they think would be important for them to feel safe to speak from the heart and listen to the heart. Then, have students share their value during the round, and move to place their value around the circle center piece. Keep these values and have them as part of the standing center piece moving forward.)

Another idea is to use a circle at the beginning of a new year or course to generate classroom norms, that are co-created with teacher and students, and will be adhered to throughout the entire year, in the circle or not. This is a proactive problem-solving prompt that helps build a supportive learning environment for the year and involves student voice rather than teacher-directed rules. A circle, once established, is a safe space for students to say what they will need from others to feel safe and a part of the classroom community.

The Community Circle Components are as Follows:

- Welcome
 - Welcome participants to the circle. Take a moment to explain the circle center piece. Distribute the Circle Guidelines (example below) and have each student take turns reading one, until all have been read. Be sure to ask if the group needs anything modified or added before all signaling together to be in agreement (example: thumbs up).

- Explain the Centerpiece
 - Identify any items in the center and why you chose to place them, as a place to rest your eyes if needed (examples: plants, hobby items, circle values cards)
- Explain the Talking Piece
 - Explain the Talking Piece is an important element of the process. It creates a space for all to speak in turn and from a place of truth. The person holding the talking piece has the opportunity to speak without interrupt and those listening can listen without needing to respond. Monitor this carefully, and if needed, stop the circle to revisit Circle Guidelines and expectations, especially early on in the learning process.
 - Participation in circles is **voluntary**. Be sure to explicitly share that passing is allowed, although all voices are encouraged. Explain that if a participant passes during a round, you will come back to them at the end of the round to see if they would like to contribute at that time. Students are always free to sit and listen, but not speak, without judgment.
- Opening/Connection Round
 - This is a fun prompt to warm up the group and should be brief. The facilitators participate as well! Be sure to model the length of response and be explicit. You can also build in a mindfulness moment (breathing exercise, self-reflection prompt, etc.)
- Round 1 Question
 - Share the question aloud. Consider having this written as well and posted for students to reference. Model and point out the expected length of response to keep the circle moving within a limited period of time while balancing need for space to share.
- Round 1 Summary
 - Provide a brief summary of the responses of the round. This acknowledges the voices and ideas shared and provides opportunity for reflection.
- Round 1 Connection
 - This is an important piece. The talking piece goes back around the circle, and participants are invited to briefly connect to someone else they heard speak during the round. This can quickly become a full round if not modeled and explained ("I connect to Andrea because I also get stressed and worried right before public speaking."). Encourage connection to ideas of others versus connections to friends.
- Repeat with Round 2, if desired
 - If short on time, sometimes it is appropriate to skip the second connection round. You will find as your classroom connects more often that they might build in natural connection statements to the question round itself and feel this sufficient.
- Closing Round
 - This can be a brief reflection, sound (such as chimes or music) or moment of silence. It is important to thank everyone for coming and participating.

Sample Materials:

[Circle Lesson Plan- PCSD Template](#)

[Guidelines for Circles- PCSD](#)

[How to Turn Challenging Moments into Teachable Moments- PCSD](#)

See this Instructional Move in action:

VIDEO??

Read more about this Instructional Move:

Book: *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* (Boyes-Watson and Pranis, 2015) ***All buildings have one or more copies of this resource- check with your school counseling department!

Article: [Community Circles Build Restorative School Cultures](#) (ASCD, 2022)

[CASEL Community Building Circles Guide](#)