

Circles

Purpose and features

Restorative practices are held in a circle so that not one person is seen as the leader or in control. Through participating in circles regularly, students will learn the value of building and maintaining peaceful classroom communities, develop and use language that is reflective of restorative practices and use restorative questioning to help them communicate more effectively. This is fundamental in the preventative and early intervention stages of the [care continuum](#). Roffey and MacCarthy (2013) state that circles have a philosophy and a set of principles that should be followed. These are:

- Equality and Democracy - Everyone sits in a circle and has the chance to speak. No one can dominate the circle. The circle includes activities that allows the students to get to know one another and speak to others that they may not know very well.
- Safety - There is no pressure to speak and sometimes the third person is used. Issues can be discussed but not specific incidents. The activities allow for collaboration, not competition.
- Respect - Everyone listens to the person speaking. Verbal or non-verbal put-downs are not allowed.
- Inclusion and choice - The circle's main aim is student choice to participate, not adult control. If anyone is asked to leave the circle then they can re-join once they are ready to follow the guidelines of the circle. The circle promotes inclusion of all students with adjustments being made where needed.
- Positivity - Circles focus on developing strengths and solutions. They allow the students to work on shared positive goals and promote positive thoughts and actions.
- Agency - Students are given occasions to talk about issues that are important to them rather than being told what to do. This should increase the chance for all students to abide by the decisions they make.
- The facilitator's role is to:
 - not control the circle
 - manage and fully participate in what happens in the circle
 - model the expected behaviour
 - encourage reflection throughout the circle.



Types of circles

Eight different types of circles are described below.

Basic circle

Everyone sits in the circle, facing inwards. There should be no physical barriers between participants. A talking piece is used to indicate to the circle who is speaking and who they should be giving their attention to. The talking piece is passed around the circle in sequence. Students do not have to speak in the circle if they are handed the talking piece. Students always have the option to pass. This circle supports the prevention and early interventions levels of the care continuum.

Popcorn circle

This is similar to the basic circle; however, it does not use a talking piece and does not go around the circle in sequence. Students can put up their hand to speak, speak up without asking as long as they don't speak over someone. A popcorn circle does not require all students to speak. This circle supports the prevention, early intervention and targeted levels of the care continuum.

Fishbowl circle

A basic circle is formed and then a small group of volunteers (about 4 to 6, depending on the size of the group) make a smaller circle in the centre. The students face inward so they can talk to those in the centre circle. The students in the outside circle stay silent and observe what is being said in the centre circle. They are witnesses. The students in the centre circle discuss the issue with or without the talking piece. The issues can be ones the students would like to address either because something has happened, or they want to discuss what could they do if it did happen.

At the end of the circle discussion, students in the outside circle are asked questions about how well they thought the circle went or what could be done differently. During a circle session, there could be 2 or 3 different groups placed in the centre circle to discuss the issue. This circle provides opportunities for students in the outside circle to reflect on what is being said. This circle supports the prevention, early intervention and targeted levels of the care continuum.

Spiral circle

This is like a fishbowl circle but with an empty seat in the centre circle. Students in the outer circle are asked to join the centre circle if they would like to contribute to what is being said. Students in the centre circle can move to the outside circle once they have shared. This circle is good for large groups and discussing difficult situations when only a few people are prepared to discuss the matter. This circle supports the early intervention and targeted levels of the care continuum.



Wheelhouse circle

Every second student moves their chair a metre into the centre of the circle, then turns them around so they are facing another student. They then become a pair. Give the circle a question to discuss. Each person in the pair needs to contribute. After a set time, signal it is time to move and everybody in the outside circle stands up. They leave their chairs and move two chairs to the left. A new question is given. The process is repeated as many times as you like. Teachers are encouraged to participate as it allows for them to get to know their students better. This circle is good to build positive relationships amongst students who may not otherwise talk to one another. This circle supports the prevention, and early interventions levels of the care continuum.

Small group/student leader circles

Breaking into smaller groups can help if you have a lot of students wanting to share their thoughts and ideas. Smaller circles should be about 4 to 8 students and a talking piece should be used. A student leader can be assigned for each group but only if the students have a lot of experience in participating in circles, as they need to know the processes involved and know how to facilitate not dominate the circle. The question or topic to discuss should be given to the students before they move into their smaller circles. The circle should be set up as a basic circle. Consider allocating time at the end to form a fishbowl circle so that all the student leaders can sit in the centre circle and discuss what it was like to be leaders. This circle supports the prevention, early intervention and targeted levels of the care continuum.

Restorative justice circle

This circle is usually set up as a basic circle formation. Bonnel et al. (2018) explains that this circle resolves incidents by bringing parties together to discuss conflicts that have taken place and to discuss strategies to avoid harm in the future. Supports, strategies and ways to resolve the harm are discussed in this circle and a plan to move forward is the desired outcome. The focus is on the person who harmed taking responsibility for their actions, repairing the relationships with the person who was harmed and understanding that the people within the circle are there to support them making positive behaviour change. This circle may involve community members, local police officers, family members, school services staff and school staff. Each person within the circle is there in a proactive and supportive capacity. This circle supports the individual intervention level of the care continuum.

The method of shared concern

The method of shared concern is used to target bullying behaviour. It involves holding discussions separately with the person who was bullied and the person or group of people who bullied. All parties are brought together to address the harm caused and develop a solution through a restorative circle once the facilitator believes it will be productive to do so. This circle supports the targeted and individual levels of the care continuum.



Circles' origins as a restorative practice

Global indigenous communities have a long-standing history of living in alignment with what we now refer to as restorative practice. The circle process that many non-Native people use today is rooted in the tradition of talking circles that Native Peoples in North America use and have used for millennia. Different Native Peoples practice different forms of the circle process. In these traditions, circles are far more than a technique; they are a way of life. Circles embody a philosophy, principles, and values that apply whether people are sitting in circle or not. (From Living Justice Press.org/About Circles).

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