

## Essential Elements of a Circle

1. Describe the meaning of sitting in a circle

Reflects the universe (everything the power of the World does, it does in the Circle—sky is round, Earth is round like a ball, the wind whirls, birds make their nests in circles, the seasons make a great circle and come back again to where they were, and our lives are lived in a circle from childhood to childhood. And so it is in everything where power moves (*Neihardt, 1988*).

Geometry matters! It is very important to seat everyone in a circle. That seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and be accountable to one another face to face. It also creates a sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of 'sides'. A circle emphasizes equality and connectedness. Removing tables is sometimes uncomfortable for people, but it is important in creating a space apart from our usual way of discussing difficult issues. It increases accountability because all body language is obvious to everyone.

2. Center Piece—the circle has a center. It is said that when we speak we speak into the center, everyone's voice is added to the center and from the center the wisdom of the circle (class) will emerge. Once someone has spoken into the center, their contribution becomes the property of the circle, a part of the shifting story, and a pathway toward an understanding that comes clearer little by little.

The centerpiece usually sits on the floor in the center of the open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically there is a cloth or mat as the base. The centerpiece may include items representing the values of the core self, the foundational principles of the process, and/or a shared vision of the group. Centerpieces often emphasize inclusion by incorporating symbols of individual circle members, as well as cultures represented in the circle. Centerpieces can be collectively built with more and more representation of the group and the individuals in the circle as time goes on.

3. Values—ideally the participants do a round to establish the values that will guide how people behave and relate in the circle. They move us beyond positional thinking by calling forth the best who we are. Values are constructed together. They are the mechanism that conveys the idea that everyone is responsible. Common values are respect, honesty, sharing, courage, humility, compassion, etc.

4. Behavioral guidelines—commitments and promises about how participants will behave in the circle. Guidelines are not rules, they are elastic. They help put shared values into practice.

- Listen from the heart (no judgments)
- Speak from the heart (no need to rehearse-just say enough and no more)
- Remain in the circle (even when it's hard)
- Honor confidentiality

- Deal with issues such as cell phones, bathroom breaks

The guidelines articulate the agreements among participants about how they will conduct themselves in the circle dialog. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviors that the participants feel will make the space safe for them to speak their truth. Guidelines are not rigid constraints but supportive reminders of the behavioral expectations of everyone in the circle. They are not imposed on the participants but rather are adopted by consensus of the circle.

5. Talking piece—Principle of non-interference.
  - Regulates dialogue through an object of special meaning or symbolism
  - Fosters respect for listening and reflection
  - Passed clockwise around the group from person to person signaling the opportunity to speak.
  - Person with talking piece speaks without interruption, holding the piece in silence, or passing it in silence to the next person.
  - Talking piece may be “suspended” and placed in the center of the circle and allow free conversation after everyone has had a chance to speak.
  - Talking piece develops listening skills. Participants wait to speak until the talking piece has come to them. The waiting brings deeper listening and reflection such that the person may change the way they thought they would respond when the talking piece comes to them.
  - The talking piece helps people listen to themselves. Each verbal contribution is an offering. There is no crosstalk, debate, or domination. There is no correcting, counseling or fixing anyone’s experience in any way.

6. Guiding questions.

Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of many rounds to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the circle. Every member of the circle has an opportunity to respond to the prompting question or theme of each round. Careful design of the questions is important to facilitate a discussion that goes beyond surface responses.

7. Circle Keeper. Create and maintain a collective and safe space. The circle keeper’s role is to initiate a space that is respectful and safe and to engage participants in sharing responsibility for that space and their shared work. The circle keeper does not control the issues or try to move the group toward a particular outcome. The circle keeper is in a relationship of caring about the well-being of every member of the circle. Keepers do this not from a place of detachment but as an equal participant in the Circle. The keeper may engage the circle in reflecting on its own process when needed by maintaining the use of the talking piece going around in order. The keeper organizes the circle logistics—time and place, preparation, selecting the talking piece and centerpiece, planning the opening and closing ceremonies and formulating some guiding questions.

## Components of a Circle

### 1. Opening Ceremony

Circles use openings and closings to mark the circle as a sacred space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group. The clear marking of the beginning and end of the circle is very important because the circle invites participants to drop the ordinary masks and protections they may wear that create distance from their core self and the core self of others. Openings help participants to center themselves, bring themselves into full presence in the space, recognize interconnectedness, release unrelated distractions and be mindful of the values of the core self.

### 2. Value Setting

Circles use values to lay the foundation of the space. Participants work together to define those values. Circle members explain why the value they select is important to them. Examples of value questions are:

- When you are human, at your best, what qualities describe you?
- What is something you value about your family?
- Choose a value that is important to you and the way you wanted to be treated in school.

### 3. Rounds: Getting Acquainted

The purpose of this round is for people either to get acquainted or to check in. The keeper shares first. Examples of getting acquainted activities are:

- Share a funny story from your work.
- Who are some of your heroes? Why are they your heroes?
- What is the best thing that happened to you this week?

### 4. Rounds: Building Relationship

The purpose of this round is to develop awareness and recognize the people who matter to us. Examples of building relationship questions or activities are:

- Talk about a time when you wish you'd made a different decision than the one you did make.
- What does it mean to "speak from the heart?"
- What kinds of things make you feel safe and happy in our classroom?

## 5. Rounds: Addressing Issues

In this round, the Keeper poses a pertinent question(s) and passes the talking piece. Generally the Keeper goes first but that is not a hard and fast rule. You can decide that based on the nature of the round and what makes the most sense. In addition to questions, Keepers might direct participants to engage in an activity that helps them connect their thoughts and feelings on a topic. Keepers follow the activity with multiple rounds about what they just experienced as well as their reflections about the topic. In addressing issues, there may be multiple rounds of questions. For example, in addressing the issue of choosing trustworthy friends, a series of questions might include the following:

- Brainstorm the meaning of the word “trust”. What does “trust” mean to you? (*Write all the meanings on a flip chart*)
- Why is trust important? List at least three benefits you get from trusting your friends? (*Write all the benefits on a flip chart*)
- How can you tell if someone you are friends with can be trusted? What are some of the small signals that tell us that someone is trustworthy? What are some of the small signs and signals that tell us if someone is untrustworthy? (*List these signs of trustworthiness and lack of trustworthiness on a flip chart*)
- In our lives we don’t choose our family but we do choose our friends. Would any of these signs help you decide if you want to be friends with someone? Do you think you should be friends with someone who gives you signs that they may be untrustworthy?
- Are there things you can do to make yourself more trustworthy as a friend or partner?

## 6. Taking action.

The issue or conflict discussed leads to some level of action. The action may include ideas about what can be done to repair a harm or create a positive future. It may include the making of agreements with plans and commitments everyone agrees on. It may be the sharing of ideas about some issue or problem or something the participant commits to do. Examples of questions that elicit taking action are:

- What do you think needs to be done to make things right now?
- What could you do when someone’s being disrespectful without you being disrespectful?
- What’s something you are still wondering about?

## 7. Closing ceremony

Closings acknowledge the efforts of the circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives. Openings and closings are designed to fit the nature of the particular group and provide opportunities for cultural responsiveness. In an on-going group participants may be involved in doing openings and closings or may design the opening and closing for the group. Examples of closings are:

- Read a poem
- Play music relevant to the core theme
- Have each participant draw the name of another participant and name something they appreciate about that participant.



## 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 had to let go of control
- 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 Potential Circle Starters:

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| 1. I feel happy when...                | 33. My favorite weekend activity is...               |
| 2. I feel sad when...                  | 34. My favorite song is...                           |
| 3. I feel angry when...                | 35. My favorite sport is...                          |
| 4. I feel scared when...               | 36. My favorite color is...                          |
| 5. I feel excited when...              | 37. My favorite weather is...                        |
| 6. I feel stressed when...             | 38. Rain makes me feel...                            |
| 7. I feel alone when...                | 39. Wind makes me feel...                            |
| 8. The scariest thing...               | 40. Sunshine makes me feel...                        |
| 9. My favorite hobby...                | 41. Snow makes me feel...                            |
| 10. My favorite pet...                 | 42. Fog makes me feel...                             |
| 11. My favorite food is...             | 43. Today I feel...                                  |
| 12. My favorite T.V. show is...        | 44. When I think of blue, I think of...              |
| 13. My favorite weekend activity is... | 45. When I think of red, I think of...               |
| 14. My favorite song is...             | 46. When I think of green, I think of...             |
| 15. My favorite sport is...            | 47. When I think of yellow, I think of...            |
| 16. My favorite color is...            | 48. When I think of black, I think of...             |
| 17. My favorite weather is...          | 49. When I think of brown, I think of...             |
| 18. Rain makes me feel...              | 50. When I think of white, I think of...             |
| 19. Wind makes me feel...              | 51. If I were an animal, I would be...               |
| 20. Sunshine makes me feel...          | 52. If I were a famous actor/actress, I would be ... |
| 21. I feel happy when...               | 53. If I were a famous athlete, I would be...        |
| 22. I feel sad when...                 | 54. When I graduate from high school, I want to ...  |
| 23. I feel angry when...               | 55. When I become an adult, I want to...             |
| 24. I feel scared when...              | 56. When I start my career, I want to ...            |
| 25. I feel excited when...             | 57. I can't wait until...                            |
| 26. I feel stressed when...            | 58. Friends are ...                                  |
| 27. I feel alone when...               | 59. Families are...                                  |
| 28. The scariest thing...              | 60. Putdowns make me feel...                         |
| 29. My favorite hobby...               | 61. Appreciations make me feel...                    |
| 30. My favorite pet...                 |  |
| 31. My favorite food is...             |  |
| 32. My favorite T.V. show is...        |  |