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## Tips for Facilitating Community Building Circles

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Circles have been used by indigenous cultures for centuries as the forum for building community, planning and problem solving. Many proven programs that schools employ to create more connection between students include regularly scheduled student meetings that take place in a circle in home room, classroom, activity periods or advisory times. These are often referred to as community building circles. Ideally a circle should not have obstructions like desks, books, or computers in front of people as these obstructions can hinder forming connections between students. It is useful to use a talking piece to designate whose turn it is to speak. A talking piece can also be used to cultivate an atmosphere of respect. The first circle should devote time to developing a set of agreements about how people will conduct themselves during the circle. It is recommended to review these agreements before each subsequent circle. The circle is facilitated by a teacher who asks questions aimed at helping students find common interests, ideas and experiences that will build connections between students. The following are some guidelines for effective facilitation of a community-building circle:

- Use a talking piece.
- Review the agreements for listening and behavior.
- Keep a positive attitude.
- Speak so that people on the other side of the circle can hear you and encourage others to do the same.
- Ask people to speak to the whole circle. After asking a question, divert your gaze from the speaker and look around the circle so that the speaker will not just speak to you.
- Unless you are seeking very brief statements, use open-ended questions.
- Pause after asking a question to give people time to think before passing the talking piece.
- It is often a good idea to be the first to answer a question as a model for the type of answer you are looking for.
- Position yourself so that you pass the talking piece to someone who will give an appropriate response to the question and set a positive tone for the circle.
- If you know that a person has auditory processing problems, consider sharing the circle questions with them in writing ahead of time.
- Remember to check back with those who pass to invite them to speak once more.
- You as a facilitator may speak without the talking piece. For example, you may need to remind the circle participants about the agreements or to answer a question that arises.



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When student circles take place over time, on a regular basis, they build connections and help students accept differences as a normal part of school life.

Initially, the community-building circle is not a dialogue between students. The facilitator asks a question, models an appropriate response and passes the talking piece to the person next to them. That person responds and passes the talking piece. Asking questions is designed to gradually increase the amount of personal information shared. Beginning with general questions about relevant likes, dislikes and other interesting topics, students gradually become comfortable sharing with the group members. Beginning circle questions could include, “Talk about a favorite place.” “If you could be any animal, what would you want to be and why?” “Who is your favorite character from a book or movie and what do you like about them?” Beginning questions are relatively non-threatening and get students used to the idea of sharing at circle. It is an opportunity for students to recognize that others they may not yet know well have similar interests and experiences. As time goes on and connections are made, the questions can invite students to share more about their lives, personal aspirations and ideas about their future. Questions like, “What’s your dream job?” or “Who is your hero and why?” ask students to share more of what is personally important to them. Keep in mind that an individual may choose to pass on any question. To role model important communication skills as well as increase connection, empathy and respect, the adult facilitator also shares during circle. As the group grows to trust the circle as a safe place to share, participants learn to listen deeply to each other and appreciate the differences that make each of them unique.

Sometimes temperamentally quiet students choose to pass rather than share. There is no point in trying to force sharing. Students who continue to pass can be approached outside the circle and engaged in some collaborative problem solving by asking, “I’ve noticed that you haven’t shared at circle. What’s up?” It is an opportunity to get to know this student better and perhaps ask them to suggest a question that they would like to answer.

Gaining trust within the circle process is critical and requires consistency and skilled facilitation from the adult. This is especially true regarding violations of the group’s agreements about behavior at circle. Most agreements contain statements about listening without interruptions, sharing speaking time, not having side conversations and generally being respectful toward each other. A gentle reminder to the whole group about an agreement being broken can often resolve the problem. For example, rather than speaking directly to the two people having a side conversation the teacher can address the whole group with, “Please remember our agreement to not have side conversations while others are speaking.” Saying this while gazing around the circle rather than intently focusing on the pair talking to each other is a non-confrontational way of addressing the issue. It also models an adult willing to accept a minor behavioral error without chastisement that could set the stage for escalation.



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Expect that students will test the limits of a group agreement. Negative or critical comments on what someone shares, or remarks directed at an individual, require a more nuanced statement from the teacher depending on the nature of the statement. Teacher may choose not to address the mean behavior directly in the moment but instead, say to the target, “I am so sorry that has happened to you in my class. Thank you for offering to respond. Please keep doing so.” Then asking the aggressor to stay after class and engaging them in a reflective process that includes questions like, “What did you say?” “What were you trying to make happen?” “Who was affected by that statement?” “How were those people affected?” “How do you know?” “What should you do to make it right?” Using this approach (often referred to as restorative dialogue), rather than just sending the student to the office or detention, has many benefits. It models a caring adult working through a student disruption in a non-hostile way that engages the student with the teacher and builds connection and trust. This one-on-one process is at the heart of restorative practice. It is a genuine attempt to work with a student to help them understand the impact of their behavior on others and repair any harm to relationships caused by them.

If community-building circles are to be effective, they should become part of what we regularly do at school. Once the concept of circles is established, they can take many forms and have many purposes including:

- Check-in: one thing you are looking forward to today/this week
- Check out: something you are going to do after school/tonight/this weekend
- Previewing: one thing you want to learn about (topic/unit)
- Summary: one thing I learned today
- Quick survey: opinion/questions
- Addressing issues in class in a non-confrontational way
- Having fun together
- Democratic decision-making
- Problem-solving

Student voice in the operation of a school or class is essential to a healthy educational process. Community-building circles provide a forum for all student voices to be heard.

### **The use of community building circles among educators**

Likewise, community-building circles may be used as a tool to build cohesion, improve relationships, solve problems and build consensus about important staff issues. For a school to adopt a restorative approach it is important for staff to engage in the practices supporting that approach. Staff trained in using community-building circles by participating in one are often surprised at how much they learn about colleagues they have been working with for years. A



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community-building circle as a regular part of staff meetings can help motivate staff to continue using them with their students and positively affect staff climate and culture.

The process with staff is similar to the student process in that there is a set of agreements established in the first circle and the use of a talking piece. Questions in a staff circle have the same intent as in a student circle. That is, building connections among group members. Questions can vary from questions about interest, hobbies and travel and progress to more personal queries about basic values, beliefs and wishes for the future. Questions like, “What’s one value you try to live and model each day?” or “Talk about something happening in the world that inspires you” offers people the opportunity to share information about themselves that doesn’t usually happen in a staff meeting at school.

Incorporating staff circles into life at school will help establish restorative practices as an important aspect of school culture. Just as teachers can do quick check-in or check out circles with students, that type of circle can also become a regular part of staff meetings as well. As circles become more commonplace in a school, interpersonal barriers break down, new connections become established and maintained and subsequently, school climate and culture improve.