



Introduction

The purpose and benefits of Circle Time

If the purpose of Restorative Practice is to restore relationships in the wake of wrongdoing or conflict, then the role of Circle Time is to help build the relationships children consider worth restoring. Circle Time is a practical way to skill young, developing human beings to listen with understanding, tune into feelings, share opinions and begin to see the world from another's viewpoint. These are the very skills children need to function successfully in any social setting.

*Circle Time is a regular classroom activity designed to increase class cohesion and a supportive climate and develop social and emotional competencies within individuals and groups. It has been developed both in the United States of America and the United Kingdom where it is a well-known intervention (Taylor, 2003, cited in Roffey, 2005)**

*Circle Time is a planned, regular time, where students are brought together to sit in a circle to engage in a range of group activities. The main aims of Circle Time are to mix students up so they interact outside of their normal groups, help children develop an understanding of self and others, and promote a positive sense of community through a range of structured interpersonal interactions. (Hansberry, 2009)**

As schools become bigger, busier and more accountable to provide evidence of student achievement, practices that build and maintain healthy relationships and belonging are sadly often the first things to disappear from classroom programs. However, when we quietly reflect on what we know sustains a readiness to learn, we are reminded that belonging and emotional safety provides a critical emotional backdrop. Learning is the casualty in classrooms characterised by poor interpersonal relationships and conflict. Research indicates that schools that focus on building and maintaining relationships and a sense of belonging, and are explicit about their expectations in regards to relationships, behaviour and learning outcomes are safer and more productive. Needless to say, there are obvious benefits for the wellbeing of teachers in these environments.

As a complementary pedagogy to the range of Restorative Approaches, Circle Time allows schools to recapture the importance of relationships and belonging, whilst simultaneously covering a range of learning outcomes.



Circle Time is not a disciplinary tool

Although there are clear links between Circle Time and Restorative Practices, it is important not to confuse the two. Circle Time is a positive, strengths-based pedagogy focused on the building of a sense of belonging for all students. It is a process for developing relationships. Restorative Conferencing, on the other hand, is a process for addressing wrongdoing and conflict and repairing damaged relationships.

We would like to dispel the myth that Circle Time is a form of Restorative Justice Conferencing and can be used to hold individual children (or groups) accountable for repairing harm. As soon as we are asking questions like 'What happened?' and 'What were you thinking?' we are using Restorative Conferencing – this is not the domain of Circle Time.

Circle Time does however have a very positive effect on student behaviour. Findings by Professor Florence McCarthy (2009)* support what we have experienced over the years with many groups of children:

*Among changes noticed were improvements in the behaviour of students in classrooms. Students were more courteous and paid better attention to their teachers; they showed increased caring and concern for their classmates and, in many cases, classrooms appeared to be happier and more friendly places. Additional changes within the classroom were that student behaviour towards others improved; they were more willing to work together; there was more mixing across friendship and gender groups, and more attention and concern paid to other children. *(McCarthy, 2009)*

Developing Circle Time in your classroom or centre

Circle Time encourages democratic and supportive environments where children develop an understanding of feelings, interact with peers, friends and teachers, and feel a sense of belonging to a group. Circle Time:

- Develops a more supportive class ethos
- Increases social and emotional skills for all children
- Increases connectedness, resilience and well being

Is Circle Time training for teachers necessary?

In a word, yes! Circle Time is a pedagogy, based on a philosophy. In many ways, we need to remove our teacher hat when we facilitate Circle Time. Otherwise we run the risk of over-controlling sessions and facilitating in a way that is at odds with the philosophy of Circle Time. This can send the wrong messages to children about how to interact in Circle Time. Undertaking training in Circle Time facilitation gives teachers a much better chance of reaping the benefits of learning and relationships.

For information about where to get Circle Time training go to www.hansberryec.com.au

What does Circle Time look like?

How do people sit?

Everyone sits in a chair in a circle formation. Yes, even the teacher! Chairs are more comfortable than sitting on the floor and allow for slightly longer attention spans. Using chairs also keeps the shape of the circle, particularly in games where people change places. Chairs add formality to the process and signify the importance of coming together as a group. If chairs are not possible, using carpet squares or masking tape on the floor can work. Use chairs if at all possible. All classrooms can establish a routine for moving furniture to set up a circle with some patience and practice.

How many children in a circle?

For preschool children (3-5 years old), it's best to start with circles no bigger than ten children (Collins 2001, p 8)*. A small circle gives a sense of safety and children don't have to wait long for a turn. This obviously poses some organisational challenges of what to do with the rest of the children! In settings like preschools, breaking the children into Circle Time groups works well. One group has Circle Time while the remaining children are engaged in various other adult-led activities. Each group is then able to rotate through the various activities. It is important that these groups are constantly mixed up, however, so all children are able to interact, allowing for connections and friendships to develop.

By school age, whole class circles are generally manageable for most children.

How long should a Circle Time session run?

Keep Circle Time sessions short and punchy. The idea is to leave the children wanting more! Ten to twenty minutes is ample for early years children. Keeping sessions short maximises success. If many children have lost attention and Circle Time has become too much of a challenge, bring the session to a close. Remember we want children to enjoy and feel comfortable in the process.



Circle Time format

Predictability of format is important. Some Circle Time books suggest an identical format each session. We have found that starting and finishing a Circle Time session the same way each time is enough. Typically, a session will begin with a welcome from the adult. The Circle Time rules will then be read aloud. The main content of the session will follow, sometimes based on a topic or theme. The concluding activity will be a quiet (settling) game or visualisation.

Start slow

Circle Time might be a completely new way of interacting for some groups.

It's best to start in very short bursts with a focus on games. Slowly introduce activities that get children speaking (like sentence completions) and later on introduce partner and small group work. Introducing themed learning too early may bring problems. Children need to first learn that Circle Time is a fun and safe place. In time, children will develop the skills and trust in one another to handle themed sessions. The suggested sessions in this manual are themed, so only introduce them when you think the children are ready.



Circle Time rules: Developing friendly behaviours

In Circle Time we want children to behave considerately and be in charge of their own behaviour. This of course can be a challenge! Having Circle Time rules is critical to ensuring success. Establish these rules at the outset and then revisit them at the beginning of every Circle Time session.

The Circle Time rules

Circle Time is organized around three separate rules (guidelines) that guide the behaviour and interaction of all participants (including teachers):

- Everyone has a turn and everyone listens when someone has their turn
- You may pass when it is your turn
- There are no 'put-downs'

Depending on the age of the group, these basic 3 rules can be worded in different ways, but always hinge on the principles of Circle Time that include democracy, respect, empathy, community, safety, inclusion and choice (Roffey 2006, p 4)*.

Building commitment to the Circle Time rules

Regular and patient implementation of the Circle Time rules builds success. With very young groups of children the teacher will simply tell children the Circle Time rules. As groups become familiar and comfortable with Circle Time, opportunities can be developed to build understanding and commitment to the rules. Asking the children to raise their hand if they think the rules are fair is a first step to inviting consultation. In later sessions the teacher may ask children to change places if they believe the rules help to make Circle Time fun and fair. More practised Circle Time groups can be invited to discuss how relevant they feel the rules are to ensuring a fun and safe time for all.

Tailoring the Circle Time rules

As groups become more familiar with Circle Time, the rules can also be tailored by the group, to suit the group's needs. One Grade 2 class added the rule "we only laugh with people, not at them" in response to some hurt feelings during previous sessions. This was an extension of the "no put down rule" that the group made more explicit.

Another expression of the Circle Time rules is:

- We listen when someone else is speaking
- We may pass
- We don't remind anyone else what they should be doing
- There are no "put downs"

Collins (2001)* suggests the following set of rules for younger children.

1. Only one person talks at a time
2. Listen and look at the person who is talking
3. Don't touch the people sitting next to you
4. We don't say things to upset people
5. You can pass if you need time to think

The Talking Piece

Passing an object around the circle to show whose turn it is to speak is the key to safe, fun and productive circles. This object, the Talking Piece can be something that feels nice to hold but isn't too distracting — it's important that little ones concentrate on what they are going to say, not the Talking Piece!

We have seen some truly inventive Talking Pieces from small fluffy toys to smooth pieces of drift wood. One teacher had a sound field system in her room for a student with a hearing difficulty. In her class the hand-held microphone was the Talking Piece. Even if your class Talking Piece isn't a microphone, don't be surprised to find the children talking into it as if it was!

Make sure that children understand that when the Talking Piece is being used in the circle, it is everyone's job to listen to the person holding the Talking Piece. This can be built into the Circle Time rules for the group e.g; "One person speaks at a time — this will be the person holding the Talking Piece."

Right to pass

Allowing children the right to pass is a critical way teachers ensure safety in Circle Time. Children will pass for any number of reasons; they don't have anything to say, they don't feel confident to share their ideas yet or perhaps they haven't understood the question or topic. Understand that these children are participating at a level that feels safe for them. When children begin to trust the process and feel more connected with their peers, they will begin to contribute, or be receptive to gentle pressure from caring and supporting teachers to share.

However, sometimes children will continually pass, with the goal of provoking a challenge from the teacher or attention from the class. As teachers, the best response to this is to simply let them pass. They will soon grow tired of passing!



Tricky behaviour in Circle Time

Settling in

Have no illusions, it can take a while for some groups to settle into Circle Time. The first sessions can be a frustrating experience for teachers. This is particularly true for groups that haven't previously worked in circles. Impulsive children will innocently forget the rules, call out and talk with children next to them when they shouldn't! Sensory seekers will, without malice, wriggle, swing their legs, or slouch in their seat. Expect some children to test boundaries. Those needy of attention may seize the opportunity to draw all eyes to them, getting noticed by others at the worst times and in the most interesting of ways! Some will struggle to listen quietly and take turns. Anxious children may refuse to join the circle. Power seekers might deliberately start side conversations or constantly pass when it's their turn, hoping for a public rebuke from others, or the teacher! Be ready for these behaviours understanding that there will be right and wrong ways to address these challenges.

The role of the teacher

Before looking at specific strategies for tackling these problems, looking at the role a teacher takes in Circle Time is important. As teachers, we actively take part in Circle Time as part of the group. We sit in the same type of seat in the circle and, whenever possible, engage in the same activities as the children. As the teacher, our role is as a model of Circle Time principles as well as be the leader of the session. Balancing these is sometimes tricky.

So, the challenge is how we deal with less than perfect behaviour but at the same time maintain the flow of the session, encourage self-responsibility, follow the Circle Time rules and model democracy, respect, empathy, community, safety, inclusion and choice? Well, with some groups it's just not easy and takes practise. Children are reliant on a poised and calm teacher to lead the way.

One thing is for certain; responding to every incident of challenging behaviour with a corrective comment or rebuke conveys the message that you are in charge of making sure that people follow the Circle Time rules. This is the wrong message. It undermines children's self-responsibility and adds to the disruption, as every infraction of the rules is followed by a burst of teacher talk to challenge it! What's more, it's completely exhausting!

*The teacher is not responsible for the discipline of the group once the rules have been negotiated: everyone in the group is. If someone was unable to respect the rules I would stop the session, explain I was feeling uneasy and ask how everyone else is feeling (as a 'go-round') and then ask for ways forward. I would encourage respect for the feelings of those who appear 'disruptive' and endeavour to offer alternatives to the circle if it is proving challenging for them. Hopkins (2004:135)**

Addressing inappropriate Circle Time behaviours

Savvy responses to misbehaviour always begin with a 'least intrusive' response. (Rogers, 1995)*. Simply making eye contact, using a hand signal or a pre-arranged private cue to remind children of what they should be doing are 'least intrusive' and draw minimal attention to the offending children as possible. Good behaviour management strategies preserve children's dignity and keep relationships intact. This is crucial within the context of Circle Time, because building relationships is our purpose.

Deliberate misbehaviour is always goal directed and when chronic, based in a child's faulty beliefs about how they belong. If children knowingly break rules, it is usually because they have experienced a pay-off for doing so that outweighs the rewards for behaving cooperatively. Clever teachers are good observers of behaviour. They give careful thought to what a misbehaving child's goal is so their responses don't become part of the pay-off for misbehaviour. Teacher's knee-jerk reactions to misbehaviour almost always reinforces it – by going with our first instinct, we become part of the pay-off!

The table on the next page provides some useful strategies for dealing unobtrusively with inappropriate behaviour during Circle Time. The table doesn't address all of the ways we see young children misbehave in Circle Time, but does give an indication of the spirit in which these disruptions can be handled.



Behaviour	Possible Messages	A Considered Response
Child refusing to join Circle Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't feel safe in Circle Time Please give me attention by asking me to sit down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tactically ignore (pretend you haven't seen it) Say to group <i>"It's great to see we're almost all here... yes, thanks I can see that Justin's not quite with us yet... let's get started"</i>
Children laying in seat, leaving seat, slumping in seat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm worn out/past it I have the wriggles Please tell me to sit up so everyone will notice me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tactically ignore (pretend you haven't seen it) Praise some children who are sitting straight Hand signal to children to straighten up Make eye contact with student and then sit up straight yourself When it's a good time to speak, say <i>"Can we all please make sure we are using our seats properly?"</i> <p>If many children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring the session to a close — children are tired. Don't tell the circle that it is because of the poor behaviour, act like it was the plan anyway! Play a movement game to re-energize the group. Ask whether we need a rule for how we sit in Circle Time.
Talking out of turn Side conversations Disruptive noises or actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I've forgotten the rule I'm just impulsive and am learning where and when not to talk Please notice me everyone I'm the boss and will do what I want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tactically ignore (pretend you haven't seen it) Privately signal to offending student (fingers on lips / hand over mouth) Play an All Change game to break up troublesome groupings Praise the group for following the Circle Time rules so well Address the person whose time it is to talk and ask them if they wouldn't mind waiting until everyone is quiet because what they have to say is important — ask the rest of the group to do the same when it's their turn Play an All Change game. On changing, get close to offending student and whisper <i>"I see you're struggling with our rules today — would you like some time out of the circle to remember our rules or are you OK now?"</i> Wait for their response. Change seats with a student so you can sit near offending student(s), or right in the middle of them! Move quietly to student and say quietly but firmly <i>"I see you're having trouble with our rules today, please go and sit at (pre-arranged place) and I'll call you back when you look ready to follow our rules."</i> <p>If many children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring the session to a close (as if you were going to anyway). Don't give a lecture about how you're ending Circle Time because of their behaviour! Use a game of Silent Statements: <i>"Change places if you are feeling worried about the calling out at the moment"</i> Stop the group and re-read the Circle Time rules. Ask the group to give a show of hands for who believes all rules are being followed Stop and say to the group; <i>"Change places if you would like Circle Time to keep going." "OK — hands up — what has to start happening for Circle Time to continue?"</i>
Silly responses to questions or during activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attention seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Laugh with the group if the response is genuinely humorous! This builds community! (don't worry that this will cause a barrage of silliness from others — it rarely does) Tactically ignore behaviour (pretend you haven't heard it) Say innocently <i>"Oh, I mustn't have explained the question well enough, it was..."</i>
Inappropriate disclosure by student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I want you to know... I want help with... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interrupt: <i>"Sarah, I'm going to stop you there because that's far too important to be shared here in Circle Time. Can I talk to you later about that?"</i> Go on with the activity.
Running in the circle during movement activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I want to be first I want to sit next to... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before movement games, ask the group about safe ways to move inside the circle Praise the group for moving safely, even if a couple of children didn't! This positive approach will bring more of the behaviour you want. Once student is in their seat, signal to them to walk / slow down. Quietly talk to student(s) about moving safely in Circle Time: <i>"It's great you are enjoying Circle Time so much. You need to walk in the circle, do you think you know why?"</i> Perhaps add a new Circle Time Rule about safe movement after some conversation with the group. You might say to the group <i>"I didn't feel safe when we played that last game because some of us ran in the circle. Change places if you think we should walk inside the circle... hands up who felt safer that time..."</i>

How to use these suggested Circle Time sessions

This section contains thirteen suggested Circle Time sessions. These sessions will help develop restorative ways of thinking and behaving in the early years of school, usually aged from 5 to 9 years of age.

Age appropriateness of activities and altering sessions

The Circle Time sessions included have been written in a scaffolded way that builds on previous sessions. The over-arching aim of these sessions is to help children develop restorative ways of thinking about others as well as the language that will support them to work within a restorative culture where regular circles, collaborative decision-making and restorative conferencing are common-place.

The different activities place different demands on children's attention span, their ability to work with abstract concepts and their ability to work in pairs or larger groups. We wholeheartedly encourage you to alter the sessions to best suit the needs of children in your care. Use your knowledge of the needs of your group to decide how to alter the sessions to keep them lively, engaging and short.

Leave children wanting more at the end of a session so they will be excited the next time they have Circle Time!

If children are becoming fidgety and restless, just end the session and pick up where you left off in the next session.

As a useful guide when deciding which activities to alter, ask yourself 'what is one key idea I want the children to take from this session?' However, always include the reminder of the Circle Time rules. This is too important to leave out.

Variety of games

Please don't feel compelled to use all of the games included. We have found that groups quickly identify their favourite games and then want to play these every session. Children enjoy the comfort of familiarity, so new games don't need to be introduced too quickly. Circle Time objectives are being met when children are having fun and getting the opportunity to interact with peers outside their normal 'social zone'.



The structure of Circle Time sessions

All of the suggested Circle Time sessions follow a similar format. Below is a summary of the different types of activities included in the thirteen suggested sessions. Some are used many times in the sessions, others only once or twice.

Welcome

The teacher or children simply say something to welcome others to Circle Time. This can be done in a variety of ways. Use your, and the children's, imagination to come up with fun and quirky ways to welcome each other.

Reminder of the rules

The rules are revised at the beginning of every Circle Time session. Revisiting the agreed guidelines communicates how important it is that Circle Time is a fun and safe place for all. Again, be creative and invent imaginative ways to revisit the rules.

Mix-up activities

Mixing children up so they interact outside of normal friendship groups is fundamental to building an accepting and cohesive group. This is also a protective factor that inhibits the emergence of bullying behaviours. All Change games are a popular way to get children to move to different places in the circle. Be aware that it is completely normal for some children to try to sit next to their friends. Be creative in the selection of mixing activities and talk often about how wonderful it is to work with different people.

Silent statements

This common mix-up activity allows children to share opinions or information about themselves through movement. Silent statements allow children to have a say without saying anything.

Teacher time

This is a time where the teacher talks to the circle about the main idea or theme of the Circle Time session. Although this is an important part of themed Circle Time sessions, keep this brief. Too much teacher talk quickly detracts from the fun!

Teacher comment

The teacher makes a brief comment to help children draw meaning from an activity, or points out what is similar or diverse about the responses once children have shared something about themselves. Well-timed teacher comments help capture important teachable moments.

Pair share

This involves children talking with a person sitting next to them to find something they have in common or something they agree on.

Pair share with feedback

A pair share where partners share back what they discovered with the rest of the circle after talking to each other.

Paired interview / partner tasks

Each partner finds out something about the other by asking a specific question identified by the teacher. This promotes questioning and listening. If responses are to be shared with the circle, each partner should first ask the other partner permission to share what was discussed.

Go-around

The Talking Piece is passed around the circle giving individual children, pairs or small groups the chance to share a thought, idea or complete a sentence. With practise and prompting, children get better at keeping their responses brief and concise. With younger children in large circles (say 15 children or more), a complete Go-around with each child sharing tends to take too long to complete, overburdening attention spans. In this case it can be useful to modify the approach by rolling a ball inside the circle to hear from a smaller selection of the group.

Sentence completion

This is a Go-around activity where the teacher provides a sentence starter and children complete the sentence, sharing an opinion or feeling on a certain issue e.g; "When I'm hurt, I need..." Each child begins with "When I'm hurt, I need" and then finishes the sentence with their response e.g; "a cuddle". The teacher always begins the Go-around.

Whole group activity

This is an activity that the entire circle participates in at one time.

Circle brainstorm

All children are invited to share ideas or thoughts by putting their hand up or standing up to indicate they have something to share. The Teacher selects children to share.

Follow-up work at tables

After Circle Time has concluded, children complete a task at their tables to consolidate a topic covered. A special portfolio that contains all Circle Time-related work can be kept by each child.

Concluding activity

This is the last activity of Circle Time. The objective is to help children settle, ready to go on with other classroom activities. Quiet games and visualisations work well.

