

Relationship Building Circles

General Circle Format:

This format can be amended depending on the amount of time or topic. While it can be tempting to skip the guidelines and expectations round, it is important that you do not unless you are in a group that has been meeting in a circle for a while and have covered expectations in previous circles. A reoccurring group should always revisit the guidelines and expectations even if just briefly.

A. Guidelines / Values

B. Introduction of Talking Piece

1. Opening

2. Check-In

3. Discussion Rounds

4. Check out

5. Closing

A. Expectations

Purpose: To allow Circle participants to identify and agree upon shared guidelines for the circle. It's very important to convey the importance of and maintain accountability to the guidelines as they directly impact the success of the circle.

Core circle guidelines: "Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Engaged, and Be Yourself."

Suggestion: "Here are the core circle expectations. Are there any other expectations you would like to add?" Pass the talking piece around the circle and record any other expectations.

Operationalize Expectations: The purpose of this activity is to allow Circle participants to identify and agree upon personal and shared group expectations which everyone will honor during the circle. (Note: The traditional way is to ask people to bring their "best selves" to the discussion. Expectations we adopt remind us how to 'be' in Circle. Respect, honesty, trustworthiness, courage, are examples of such expectations. When creating expectations with students you may say it is "something that is important to you, your family, or your culture". You may also have them draw a picture.

B. Introduction of the Talking Piece

Purpose: To create an equitable environment for sharing. Everyone gets a chance to speak or has the right to pass. For those that do not have the talking piece, it is an opportunity to actively listen to the speaker.

Sometimes the talking piece may be suspended to encourage spontaneous sharing or brainstorming.

Example of a talking piece: Sacred or meaningful objects that community members can relate to or something that has meaning to someone or is relevant to the topic to be discussed. (Stuffed animal, book, stone, etc.)

Suggestion: The person holding the talking piece is the only one who may speak. Everyone else in the circle is actively listening and trying not to spend time thinking about what they are going to say.

The talking piece usually moves in a circular format (clockwise or counter clockwise). Every person has the opportunity to speak and the right to pass if they choose. Even though someone may pass, they are still able to be present and participate.

1. Opening

Purpose: To create a special or sacred space where everyone will come together to share in ways we ordinarily don't have the opportunity to do. Also to ground everyone, set a positive tone for participants to transition into the circle process.

Examples: Poems, quotes, guided meditation or breathing exercise

Suggestion: "We have come together today to learn more about one another and to be together in a way which will make our school community (or our class or group) stronger, closer and safer."

2. Check-In

Purpose: To invite participants to talk about how they are feeling on physical, mental or emotional levels at the moment.

Suggestion: Q: Name one word describing how you are feeling? If you could be a weather pattern, what pattern would describe how you are feeling right now (today)?

3. Discussion Rounds

Purpose: Choosing a topic that is appropriate for the group to discuss will directly impact the success of the circle.

If this is a new group and you are just getting to know each other, you may ask people to share what is important to them about being in this community.

Suggestion: A good prompting question for a circle will allow people to speak from a personal perspective about something that relates to the group. After asking a question that allows people to tell a story, you may ask a question that encourages people to speak about the issue or reason they were brought into the circle today (community building, celebration, general check in, conflict, current event etc.)

4. Check out

Purpose: To invite participants to express how they are feeling at this moment as the circle is about to end.

Suggestion: Share one word about how they are feeling at the end of the Circle or about what they most appreciated about the process.

5. Closing

Purpose: To close the circle with intention and allow participants to re-enter the world and acknowledge the work done in circle.

Examples: poems, quotes, do a guided meditation or breathing exercise, etc.

Role of Circle Keeper: Circle keepers are the caretaker of the circle process, they are not facilitators. As a keeper, it is your job to ensure that everyone takes responsibility for making the circle a welcoming, safe place for open dialogue. Very often, and usually unconsciously, participants will situate the keeper as an authority figure, looking to him or her to direct or make decisions for the group. When it seems the process isn't going smoothly or is taking a direction different than you imagined, it is important to remember that your role is merely to guide the group. It is your job to introduce questions that empower the group to do the work they need to do. As soon as you intervene in a more directive way, participants become less accountable for their actions and decisions. Resulting agreements become much less a reflection of their process and needs and more about what you think the group needs.

Suggested language for Circle Keepers:

Guide the process; "We ask you for suggestions for shared guidelines for our circle."

Promote Equality; "We all have important experiences and something to offer."

Generate Respect; "We are different, but we all have something to learn from each other."

Share Responsibility; "We all have a responsibility for finding solutions."

Encourage New Ideas; "Every idea is a good one. We work together to find solutions."

Seek Solutions that Benefit Everyone; "Can we find a way to meet the needs of all involved today?"

Maintain Positive Perspective; "This is difficult work, and at the same time, we are moving toward a positive outcome."

Circle Planning Guide

A. What is the purpose or goal of your circle? ex. Community building, check-in, address specific classroom issue, curriculum/content...etc.

B. Establish core guidelines: What are the core guidelines you would like to introduce to the participants? What additional questions will you ask to create shared guidelines and values? Do you have them written on a poster board for all to see?

C. Introduction of Talking Piece: What object are you using and why?

1. Opening: How will you open the circle? A poem, quote, song, breathing, story...?

2. Check-In: What question will you ask for the initial check-in round? ex. On a scale of 1-10, today I am a ...

3. Discussion Rounds: What needs to be addressed in the circle? What questions will you ask? How many rounds will you facilitate?

Consider: Are the questions you are asking high or low risk?

Does the question directly or indirectly address the purpose for the circle?

What are some potential challenges that may surface? How will you handle them?

4. Check out: What question do you want to present to bring closure to the circle? ex. how are people feeling right now?

5. Closing: How will you close the circle, praise and celebrate the participation of the circle members? poem, quote, song, breathing, story...?
