

Facilitating Safer & More Inclusive Proactive Circles

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Purpose & Audience

This guide focuses on tips and modifications to conduct proactive circles in schools. The guide will be most useful for educators, school administrators, and restorative justice practitioners with circle facilitation experience.

To learn more about facilitating proactive circles and other restorative practices, refer to the resources section at the end of this document.

About Proactive Circles

Schools use proactive circles to establish positive school culture by creating space for students, staff, and families to share and learn from each other. Proactive circles promote social-emotional learning through structured opportunities for self-exploration, self-expression, intentional listening, and engaging with the school community.

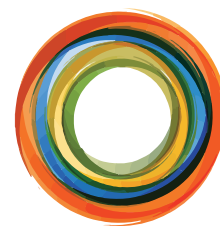
In restorative justice, the two main types of circle practices are **proactive circles** and **responsive circles**. Restorative justice practitioners use responsive circles after an incident or harm has occurred, with the intention of healing harms, making agreements, and bringing everyone back into the school community. In contrast, practitioners use proactive circles to create positive school culture and climate and prevent minor or serious incidents. Schools successfully implementing restorative practices try to focus 80 percent of their efforts on proactive strategies and 20 percent on responsive practices.

Proactive Circle Design Process

The proactive circle design process is an iterative continuous improvement cycle. First, circle keepers identify the best circle format to use. Then they assess participants' needs and design the circle flow with appropriate modifications. Circle keepers then prepare the space and materials and facilitate the circle itself. Afterwards, circle keepers should reflect on successes and challenges from the circle.



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Types of Restorative Circles

- Community-Building Circle
- Curriculum Circle / Teaching & Learning Circle
- Hot Topic Circle / Difficult Conversations Circle
- Social-Emotional Learning Circle
- Staff Circle
- Youth-Led or Peer-to-Peer Circle
- Families & Community Circle

Learn more at

www.restoratedc.org/Resources

Afterwards, circle keepers should reflect on successes and challenges to strengthen future circle processes. This guide focuses on three of these phases: assess, design, and prepare.

Assess

Circle keepers should assess participants' needs prior to designing proactive circles. Assessment will provide circle keepers the knowledge they need to select and implement appropriate modifications. Assessment may include reviewing relevant Covid-19 policies, analyzing school climate data, scanning for common social-emotional challenges, and reviewing students' individualized education programs (IEPs) or other records. As part of the assessment process, facilitators can engage participants in community-building circles to learn more about them. Circle keepers' understanding of participant needs will deepen over time as trusting relationships develop.

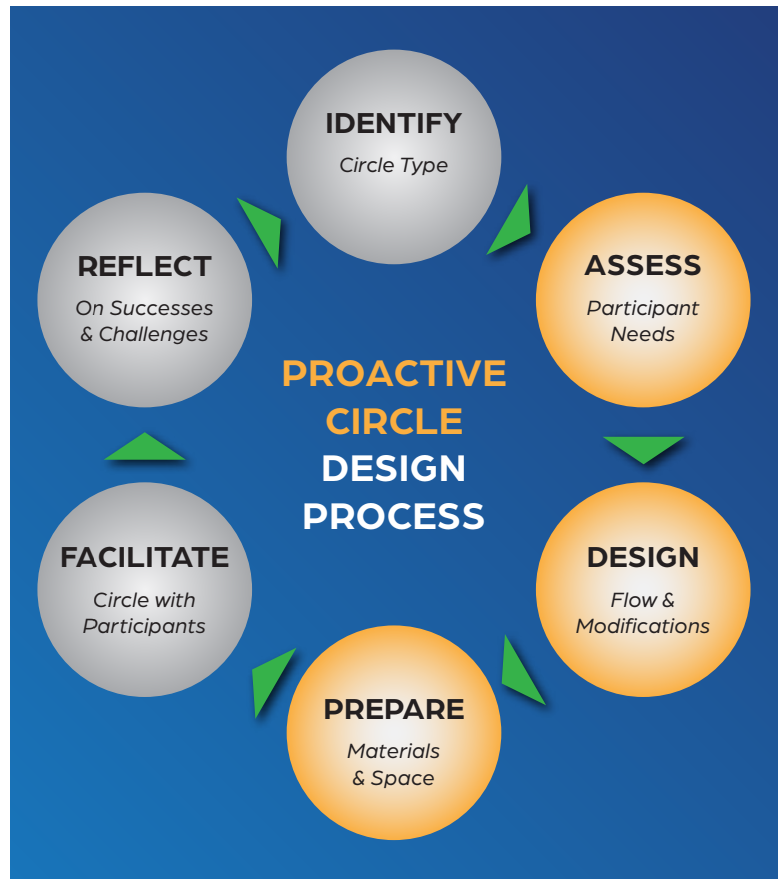
Design

After assessing participants needs, circle keepers should design the circle with appropriate modifications to engage all participants and mitigate potential barriers. The remaining sections of this document detail specific modifications in a variety of areas. Additional materials on circle flow and design can be found in the Resources section at the end of this document.

Prepare

Circle keepers should prepare all materials for the circle in advance, including readings, talking pieces and centerpieces, visuals, instructions, and more. These materials should reflect any modifications identified in the Assess and Design phases. Circle keepers should also prepare the physical (or virtual) space where the circle will occur. In a physical space, this includes appropriate seating arrangements and audio-visual technology. In a virtual environment, this means setting up the meeting platform and preparing all virtual elements. Circle keepers may need to make modifications to physical or virtual spaces to adhere to policies or guidelines and meet the needs of participants.

Incorporating circle modifications for social-emotional wellbeing during the design process and adequately preparing materials and space in advance help to create a safe space where participants can feel grounded, connected, seen, and heard.



Modifications for Safer, More Inclusive Proactive Circles

Schools should use proactive circle keeping to hear directly from students and begin building trust and fostering feelings of safety and belonging that all students need to learn and thrive social-emotionally and academically. Including modifications in the ways that the circle keeper represents information, and the ways that participants can express themselves, creates a safer, more inclusive circle experience for all participants.

Circle keepers should present information using multiple means of representation. This means presenting information in different ways, including in writing, verbally, visually, and physically. Circle keepers should also encourage participants to express themselves in whatever ways work best for them.

The next section includes circle modifications for mask wearing. After the mask section, modifications are organized by key elements common to proactive circles: seating arrangement, centerpiece, talking piece, opening ceremony, generating values and guidelines, opening round, primary circle content, closing round, and closing ceremony.

Modifications for Reluctant Participants

- Provide circle materials in advance, including question prompts.
- Allow reluctant participants to observe a circle and share reflections or ask questions afterwards.
- Allow participants opting out of the full circle to participate in small group or pair activities during the circle.
- Provide opportunities for participants to co-facilitate the circle.
- Ask hesitant participants to support the circle keeper with set up and breakdown.
- Invite a reluctant participant to become an agreement keeper, a role that helps bring the circle back to established agreements.
- Offer the reluctant participant the opportunity to lead a state changer during circle, such as a mindful moment, energizer, or movement break.
- If appropriate, ask the reluctant participant if a peer can support them or speak on their behalf.
- Allow participants to write or draw their responses and place them in the center of the circle.
- Envision additional alternate means of participation. Be creative!

Wearing Masks

Masks are beneficial because they provide some protection from Covid-19 infection for individuals and the community, but wearing masks can create barriers to classroom learning and circle participation. Circle keepers must understand these barriers and prepare to modify circle facilitation as appropriate. Below are examples of common barriers that may arise and some modifications to mitigate those barriers. Facilitators and participants can discuss these barriers and agree to be mindful of them.

Barrier & Modification Examples

- **Hearing & Comprehension**

Participants may have difficulty hearing or understanding instructions, discussions, and conversations. Masks can muffle voices and prevent listeners from seeing speakers' mouths to identify visual cues. This may have a greater impact on some participants with disabilities and English learners.

Modifications: Provide written instructions and have participants read them aloud. Circle keepers may want to read the instructions more than once. Develop a hand signal for participants to indicate when they can't hear or need something repeated. Pause regularly to check in on participants' ability to hear and understand.

- **Communicating Emotion**

Masks significantly limit our ability to perceive others' facial expressions and can inhibit the communication of participants' emotions. Emotional communication is a crucial part of proactive circles.

Modifications: Develop a set of hand signals to indicate different emotions or ideas while speaking or listening to others. Encourage participants to identify and express their emotions. Pause as needed to check in with the group or individuals to take their emotional temperature.

- **Mask Fatigue & Anxiety**

Masks can be uncomfortable and communicating through them can be particularly taxing. Some participants may experience anxiety or other negative emotions due to mask-related barriers. Poor verbal and emotional communication can cause participants to disengage.

Modifications: Acknowledge that participants may need to take a break for their physical or emotional comfort. Determine how participants can "check out" without leaving the room, if possible. Participants may turn their chairs around or go sit off to the side if they need a moment out of circle. Acknowledge participants' frustrations and ask them to be gracious with each other.

Essence

The seating arrangement of a circle is designed to communicate equity and visibility for all participants.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

Standing circles are encouraged to promote engagement and provide flexibility, particularly for brain breaks and energizers and check-in, content, and closing circles. Accommodations for larger groups include:

- Forming several small groups to create space between circle participants.
- Students remaining seated at desks in traditional class seating arrangement and participate by following the guidance of the circle keeper.
- Forming a large circle outdoors or in an open, well-ventilated indoor area with proper distancing.
- The Circle Keeper can shift from seated to standing positions and at times move

throughout the space depending on the selected circle modification.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Some students may find movement to be supportive during circle:

- When students feel overwhelmed or have a need to leave the circle, students are invited to turn their chair to face outwards.
- Teachers and students create signals to communicate the need to step away from the circle.

Learner Variability

Stretching and standing behind chairs or desks provides students with a quick brain break. When needed, students can stand behind their chairs and stretch.

To support the access needs of participants in different circle formats, circle keepers can use a combination of written communication and audio/visual aids.

Essence

The centerpiece represents the shared connection of all circle participants and the larger community. The centerpiece embodies the participants' values and may ground them in meaningful memories and stories of ancestors, family, and other community members.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

To prevent the spread of germs when multiple people are handling the same object, circle keepers can provide individual bottles of hand sanitizer and individual packets of tissues.

To support students with attention and engagement:

- Circle keeper can place fidgets with the centerpiece for students to use according to their needs.
- Students can inform the circle keeper that they will use a personal fidget during the circle.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

The creation of the centerpiece can be a collaborative process.

- Students can bring personal items to be placed on the centerpiece
- Students can share the meaning and personal stories that the centerpiece items represent.

Learner Variability

To support learner comprehension and provide multiple means of representation, teachers can create a centerpiece based on the theme of the circle.

Essence

The talking piece is an object of personal or collective significance that is used to maintain a collective agreement around communication and order in the circle.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

To prevent multiple participants from handling the same object, participants can bring their own talking pieces and keep it next to their chair.

To support a collective agreement on communication and talking order when students are not in the shape of a circle:

- Students can keep their talking pieces on their desk and lift their talking pieces to communicate that they would like to speak.
- Students can be given a number to determine the order of speaking.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Personal talking pieces are welcome. Students can bring in an object of personal meaning that helps them feel grounded and increases their sense of security and safety.

There are many forms of participation, including passing the talking piece; speaking is not required. Students can opt out of speaking if they are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, unsafe, or insecure.

Learner Variability

The talking piece is a important visual aid. Talking pieces help students track when their turn is coming.

Students that require more wait time to process responses can pass until they are ready and prepared to speak or share their response in some other way.

Essence

The opening ceremony acknowledges that the community is now beginning to enter into a circle experience together. The opening ceremony can include the use of a bell, a candle, drumming, visual pictures, movies, reading of a quotation or poem, or a grounding exercise.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

To create connection and engagement among circle participants, circle keepers can offer an icebreaker activity that invites the entire circle to participate. Example prompts include:

- "Move your body if..."
- "Stand behind your chair or desk if..."

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Inviting student participation in leading the opening ceremony is a great way to include student voice. Examples include:

- Several students read a section of a poem.
- A student can lead the ringing of the bell.

Prior to the circle, facilitators can also invite students, to share what type of opener they would like to do.

Learner Variability

To support the needs of circle participants being in separate groups and larger spaces, facilitators can use a combination of written communication and audio/visual aids.

Essence

Circle keepers help a group generate values, personal beliefs that guide interactions and behaviors in the circle. Values are at the foundation of building an atmosphere of trust and safety.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

All school protocols on social distancing, mask, and staff and student health should be explored here. Some examples of value prompts and themes are:

- **Health Guidelines:** What does teamwork mean when you think about our school safety and health guidelines?
- **Social Distancing:** Social distancing is a part of our new health guidelines. What purpose do you think social distance serves in our school?

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

There are many forms of participation, including passing the talking piece. When students are

behind desks or in small groups, students can raise their talking piece to communicate that they would like to speak their value into the circle.

Small group collaboration can be facilitated using a “pair and share” approach during circles. Invite students to work with a peer to reflect on their values.

Learner Variability

Values generation happens in different formats.

- A values list can be created using chart paper.
- Students can take turns walking to the chart paper to add new values.
- Students can write down their values on a piece of paper or dry erase board and hold it up.

Essence

Circle guidelines are collective agreements that express how participants will bring their values to life during the circle process. Guidelines are the primary principles of accountability in the circle. These guidelines may be displayed visually or read aloud. An example of a circle guideline is: “Students will not speak over other students.”

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

To ensure that all participants play a role in forming the circle guidelines:

- Each small group may form a shared guideline that the group agrees on.
- Students can take turns walking to the chart paper to add a new guideline.
- Students can lift their talking pieces in the air to signal that they would like to share a guideline out loud.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Allow for a variety of forms of participation, including passing the talking piece. Speaking is not required. Students can opt out of speaking if they are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or unsafe, or insecure.

Small group collaboration can be facilitated using a “pair and share” approach during circles. Invite students to work with a peer to reflect on the guidelines.

Learner Variability

Visuals of the guidelines serve as reminders for the circle participants.

- Chart paper can be used to create the circle guidelines.
- Displaying guidelines on a screen can be an option for reviewing already established guidelines.

Essence

In the opening round, participants introduce themselves, share something from the heart, and name how they are feeling in the moment. These questions are easy to respond to and require minimal reflection time.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

Coordinating movement with speaking can improve engagement and attention. Consider having students stand as they respond.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

To maintain clear agreement on how to respond to questions, the circle keeper may create a preassigned talking order or refer to established guidelines on speaking.

For attention and engagement, students can bring fidgets to the circle.

Sometimes students have difficulty naming and communicating emotions, especially in front of

peers. There are a variety of ways to include emotional support during the circle.

- Hang posters with emotional vocabulary.
- Place feelings cards with the centerpiece.
- List emotions on the board.
- Provide individual emotions lists.

Learner Variability

To meet access needs of all students, opening round questions may be asked aloud or visually displayed by the circle keeper.

Some students may need time to prepare in advance for the circle. Questions can be provided to students prior to the circle.

Frame questions in ways that is easily understood by all students. Simplify questions to meet the capacity needs of all students. Articulate clearly and speak slowly.

Allow pauses for students who need more time to reflect on the question before they speak.

Essence

This is where the main topic or purpose of the circle is named and discussed. Common activities here include storytelling, topic-focused conversations, and the use of guiding questions.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

Communication can be altered if circle participants wearing masks. To help participants hear and be heard, modifications may include:

- Pair and share: Students pair up with another student to share.
- Small groups (3 – 5 students)
- Audio Supports: A few students volunteer to share using a microphone and speaker.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Feelings charts or emotional vocabulary charts can help students name and express emotions.

Students can bring fidgets to help with attention and engagement.

Some students may need facilitators to modulate their volume or rate of speech. Circle keepers can repeat questions to facilitate understanding.

To boost student understanding, students can raise a talking piece to indicate when they have a question or something to say.

Learner Variability

If students do not want to share aloud, they can write down responses and invite a neighbor to share it aloud for them. Writing, drawing, and doodling can help some students maintain focus and organize their thoughts. Circle keepers should ask questions in a way that is easily understood by all students. Some students need more time to reflect before speaking. Facilitators can skip and go back to students who are not ready and allow for pauses for students sharing in circle.

Essence

The closing round provides closure by asking participants to reflect on their experiences in the circle and share identify next steps.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

To capture the voices of circle participants without requiring participants to speak, the circle keeper may provide alternatives such as:

- Nod if...
- Thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs to the side if...
- Stand up if...
- Raise your hand if...

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Sometimes students have a difficult time naming and identifying their emotions. Feelings charts or emotional vocabulary charts help students name and express emotions.

Essence

The closing ceremony is a creative way of communicating to the group that the circle experience is now coming to an end.

The closing ceremony can include the use of a bell, a candle, drumming, visual pictures, movies, reading of a quotation or poem, or a grounding exercise.

Physical Wellbeing & Covid Policies

To conclude a circle, the circle keeper can:

- End with a word of gratitude.
- Offer a shout-out to the group as a whole for participating in the circle.
- End with a personal reflection about their experience in the circle.

Learner Variability

To meet access needs of all students, closing round questions can be asked aloud and visually displayed by the circle keeper.

Passing the talking piece instead of speaking is welcomed. Students can opt out of speaking if they are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, unsafe, or insecure.

Frame questions in ways that is easily understood by all students. Simplify questions to meet the capacity needs of all students. Articulate clearly and speak slowly.

Some students need more time to reflect before speaking. Facilitators can skip and go back to students who are not ready and allow for pauses for students sharing in circle.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Inviting students to prepare and lead the closing ceremony is a great way to include student voice. Examples include:

- Several students read a section of a poem.
- A student can lead the ringing of the bell.

Prior to the circle, facilitators can invite students to share what type of closing they want.

Learner Variability

To support the needs of circle participants being in separate groups and larger spaces, facilitators can use a combination of written communication and audio/visual aids.

Resources on Restorative Practices in Education

- **Circle Forward: Building A Restorative School Community**
by Carolyn Boyes-Watson & Kay Pranis
<https://livingjusticepress.directfrompublisher.com/catalog/book/circle-forward-revised-october-2020>
- **Core Processes of Restorative Justice Circles**
by SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC
www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDAc6Qkqhj0&t=4s
- **The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking**
by Kay Pranis
To order, email rdc@schooltalkdc.org.
- **Restorative Practice and Special Needs: A Practical Guide to Working Restoratively with Young People**
by Margaret Thorsborne
www.amazon.com/Restorative-Practice-Special-Needs-Restoratively/dp/1849055432
- **Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles**
by San Francisco Unified School District
www.centerforrestorativeprocess.com/uploads/8/1/4/4/8144400/teaching_restorative_practices_manual.pdf
- **Universal Design for Learning Guidelines**
by CAST
<https://udlguidelines.cast.org>



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