

Types of Proactive Circles

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Templates and examples of the circles listed below are available in the book [Circle Forward](#) by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis. Contact us at RDC@schooltalkdc.org to order a copy.



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 proactive circles to create positive school culture and climate and prevent minor or serious incidents. Schools successfully implementing restorative practices try to focus 80% of their efforts on proactive strategies and 20% on responsive practices. **This resource provides an overview of different types of proactive circles.**

80% Proactive Building Postive School Culture & Climate Safety, Inclusion, Equity, Physical Environment, Adult-Student Relationships, Social-Emotional Learning, Interpersonal Communication	20% Responsive & Disciplinary Processes
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Community-Building Circle

Community-building circles can be used to develop relationships, establish and modify group agreements, facilitate peer check-ins, share and learn from each other's life experiences, and collectively make decisions and solve problems. The circle offers young people an opportunity to assume leadership, express themselves, listen deeply to their peers, talk about what matters to them, and relate to adults as equals. In this way, it builds community, a sense of belonging and worth, and social-emotional skills. Community-building circles work best when there is consistency, predictability, and deepening over time.

Examples

- Designing classroom guidelines
- Exploring values
- Checking in with classroom guidelines
- Celebration
- Exploring friendship
- Exploring dimensions of our identity
- Welcome back after classroom absence
- Who & what makes us feel good?
- What triggers your anger?
- Daily emotional weather report
- Exploring grief
- Listening and sharing

Academic Circle

Curriculum or teaching and learning circles create safe and predictable spaces for students to reflect on and practice curriculum concepts and skills. They can be used to invite students to share their views, knowledge, and questions. This helps students think critically and listen to and learn from one another. For a curriculum cycle to work effectively, the options to pass in circle must be genuine and honored. This will help quiet students feel safe, and, over time, create the predictable space for them to take risks and share.

Examples

- Finding out what students already know
- Checking for understanding
- Building vocabulary
- Sharing students writing in a “read-around”
- Practicing a foreign language
- Sharing reflections
- Using storybooks to teach values
- Talking about homework or studying
- Three-minute focus circle

Hot Topic Circle / Difficult Conversations Circle

Being part of a community means dedicating time to talk about differences of perspective and experience—and finding common ground! Hot topic circles can be used to discuss both recent events and larger issues, such as youth violence, race and equity, privilege, gender, and sexuality, sexual harassment, and being a bystander.

Examples

- Bereavement
- Roots of youth violence
- Witnessing violence circle
- What do we know about race or exploring our feels about race
- Exploring white privilege
- Thinking about gender and violence
- Sexual harassment

Social-Emotional Learning Circle

Although all circles provide opportunities to develop social-emotional skills, circles can be designed to practice and reflect on specific skills, such as recognizing, managing, and responding to emotions in self or others, problem solving skills, empathy, healthy relationship building and socialization skills and more.

Examples

- Self-advocacy
- Establishing positive relationships
- Emotional awareness & understanding
- Self-awareness & self-care
- Cultivating social-awareness & empathy
- Making healthy decisions
- Accountability for actions
- Social support teams

Staff Circle

“The stronger the connections between all adults responsible for the well-being of the children, the stronger the community will be in its capacity to care for them” —*Circle Forward*

Staff circles can be used to build community among staff, discuss and solve community issues, model and train staff on circle keeping, reflect on climate and culture, and more. These circles can help staff practice equity of voice and break silos among various staff roles.

Examples

- Staff team building
- Sustaining ourselves when the work is difficult
- How are the children?
- Exploring our core assumptions

Youth-Led Circle / Peer-to-Peer Circle

“The Circle organically nurtures taking responsibility and looking out for the good of the collective” —*Circle Forward*

Circles provide opportunities for all students to practice leadership skills and can act as a microcosm for the larger school culture, allowing students to reflect on and begin to intentionally build the school culture they need to be successful.

Examples

- Peer support & advocacy circle
- What do adults need to understand about our lives?
- Student focus groups on school issue or policy
- Students can be trained to facilitate all types of circles.

Families & Community Circle

Circles with families and community members can be used to increased family input and buy-in on school practices, culture and processes, build relationships among families, and to model circle keeping skills to families, increasing their understanding of and capacity to support a restorative approach in and out of the classroom. Some examples circles that could be run with families and community members include a circle to receive feedback, circles to build parent support groups and more.

Examples

- Introduction to circle process
- Feedback to the school
- New student welcome circles
- Re-entry circles
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Parent support circles for students with IEPs
- Dialogue circles for disability awareness
- Student-led IEP circles
- Community-school partnership

Restorative Circle Sizes

Large Group Circles

Circles can build connections within large groups, affirming participants' shared belonging within the larger learning environment. With this practice, participants are exposed to a diverse range of perspectives and unique experiences across the community. This structure is particularly impactful as students and staff acquaint themselves with the social and emotional skills needed to actively listen to the stories of others, self-advocate, and re-familiarize themselves with being in a large school community. The size of a large circle can range from **10 – 25 participants**. This range varies, depending on the particular learning experience and the intended outcomes of the circle. While large circles may be adapted for all communities and used in any context, larger circles tend to serve the purpose of bringing people together to establish trust, share and hear stories, and affirm community values.

Small Group Circles

Circles can build community within smaller groups, affirming participants' shared human experiences through storytelling and allowing them to reflect on how to relate with the larger community. In this way, everyone's voice is more likely to count in the school community. This structure is particularly impactful as students and staff build internal social and relational skills. Small group circles are also effective models for intentionally engaging with and supporting important members of the school community, such as English language learners, parents, volunteers, alumni, neighbors, extracurricular groups, and special focus groups. The size of a small circle can range from **3 – 10 participants**. This range varies, depending on the particular learning experience and intended outcomes. While small circles may be adapted for any context and for all communities, smaller circles are often designed for collective engagement in conversations around community grief, creating support plans for students, hosting youth-led individualized education program meetings, and responding to urgent incidents.

Self-Guided Circles

Self-guided circles offer an alternative structure to traditional community-building circles. Self-guided circles do not require a trained facilitator to guide the process. Everyone in the circle is provided an opportunity to practice being in the role of circle keeper while continuing to develop their voice as an active circle participant. In practice, all members take turns facilitating a particular element of the circle. Instructions for each circle keeper are prepared in advance, sometimes in collaboration with the circle participants and sometimes exclusively designed by one facilitator. The size of a self-guided circle can range from **5 – 10 participants**. This range varies, depending on the particular learning experience.



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