



Peacebuilders International (Canada)



Peace Circles in Schools

**OJEN Toronto Summer Law Institute
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Peace Circles in Schools

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Reading: Stone in the Water



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SAMPLE READING TO OPEN A PEACE CIRCLE

ATTITUDE DETERMINES ATTITUDE

I woke up early today, excited over all I get to do before the clock strikes midnight.
I have responsibilities to fulfill today.
I am important.

My job is to choose what kind of day I am going to have.

Today I can complain because the weather is rainy, or I can be thankful that the grass is getting watered for free.

Today I can feel sad that I don't have more money, or I can be glad that my finances encourage me to plan my purchases wisely and guide me away from waste.

Today I can grumble about my health, or I can rejoice that I am alive.

Today I can lament over all that my parents didn't give me when I was growing up, or I can feel grateful that they allowed me to be born.

Today I can cry because roses have thorns, or I can celebrate that thorns have roses.

Today I can mourn my lack of friends, or I can excitedly embark upon a quest to discover new relationships.

Today I can whine because I have to go to work, or I can shout for joy because I have a job to do.

Today I can complain because I have to go to school, or eagerly open my mind and fill it with rich new tidbits of knowledge.

Today I can murmur dejectedly because I have to do housework, or I can feel honoured because the Lord has provided shelter for my mind, body, and soul.

Today stretches ahead of me, waiting to be shaped.

And here I am, the sculptor who gets to do the shaping.

What today will be like is up to me.

I get to choose what kind of day I will have.

1. Key Concepts of Peacemaking Circles

Circles are fundamentally democratic – allowing equal space for each participant to speak and to have an equal voice in the decisions that are made.

Circles assume that not one of us has the whole picture – that it is only by exchanging and sharing of our perspectives that we can learn more about each other and come closer to a complete picture.

Circles enable respectful and reflective dialogue even in very emotional situations.

Circles create a safe space for participants to share their private thoughts in confidence.

Circles are based on an assumption of positive potential – that something good can always come out of whatever situation we are in.

2. Description of a circle process

Circles allow us to balance the ancient wisdom of being in community with the modern wisdom of honouring individual needs, interests and differences.

Circles create a space in which all people, regardless of their role or status can reach out to one another as equals and recognize their mutual interdependence in the struggle to live in a good way and to help one another through the difficulties in life.

The physical format of the circle symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection and inclusion. It also promotes focus, accountability and participation from all.

Circles are built on the tradition of talking circles, common among indigenous peoples around the world. Circles consciously engage all aspects of human experience - spiritual, emotional, physical and mental.

A reading or ceremony opens and closes a circle to mark the space of circle as a special and safe space in which participants will be present with one another.

The participants are seated in chairs placed in a circle, each facing the others. Instead of a table or other furniture in the centre, there is open space. Sometimes objects with meaning to the group are placed in the center as a focal point to remind participants of shared values and common ground. These objects may also be used as the Talking Piece. To facilitate the dialogue many of the ancient communities used a 'Talking Piece'.

The 'Talking Piece' is passed from person to person around the circle. Each person has a chance to speak without interruption when holding the talking piece, then pass the Talking Piece to the person seated next to them, or may pass without speaking. The person holding the Talking Piece may even hold it without speaking if necessary in order to collect thoughts and emotion. At appropriate times, the Talking Piece may be held down (usually) by the facilitator and the discussion may be opened to all.

The person holding the Talking Piece has the undivided attention of everyone in the circle and can speak without interruption. The use of the Talking Piece allows for full expression of emotions, deeper listening, thoughtful reflection, and an unrushed pace. The Talking Piece also creates space for people who find it difficult to speak in a group.

Depending on the purpose of the gathering and the number of people in attendance, there are one or two Circle Keepers seated among the participants.

Circles provide a way of talking together where:

- everyone is equal - no person is more important than anyone else
- everyone is respected
- everyone has an equal opportunity to participate without interruption
- everyone can present their perspective on the subject at hand.

Circles are useful when two or more people are:

- learning from each other
- sharing difficulties/ideas
- resolving conflict
- making decisions
- building teams
- celebrating

The Circle is a tool flexible enough to manage strong emotions such as anger and frustration, opposing opinions and conflict by providing a safe, respectful space to continue difficult dialogue.

3. Types of Circles

There are many different kinds of circles:

1. Sharing and Dialogue Circles: Circles can be used to share ideas and facilitate dialogues and discussions.
2. Learning Communities: Circles in schools and similar settings can be used to help develop learning communities, guide participants to learn how to make decisions and address issues that affect all or most of them.
3. Decision-making Circles: Circles can be used to help groups of people who have common interests to make decisions together in order to address common concerns.
4. Conflict Resolution Circles: Circles can be used to deal with conflicts and to address and resolve them in a manner most appropriate to all concerned
5. Restorative Justice Circles have also been used to help offenders re-enter a school or residential community after they have already served a sentence or been suspended. Circles can also be used to help determine the sentence or consequence for an offender.

4. Applications of Circles:

In schools and under the *Safe Schools Act*, Circles can be used to:

- Uncover problems or concerns of students that might interfere with learning at an early stage
- Build relationships in the classroom
- Assess student level of understanding and engagement with a topic
- Enhance speaking and listening skills
- Provide an appropriate alternative to suspension and expulsion

In the communities Circles can be used to:

- Build networks and partnerships
- Resolve conflicts
- Build group problem solving capacity
- Develop action plans

Under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* Circles can be used to:

- Provide a diversion process for the youth from the justice system
- Assist with the reintegration of a youth offender into their community
- Enable communities to participate in the rehabilitation of their youth
- Provide an opportunity for the victims to have their voices heard

5. Added value of circle format for discussion, brainstorming, problem-solving and decision-making

1. **Shared leadership** - Placing everyone in a circle minimizes hierarchal distinctions and sets a tone of equal participation and equal capacity to teach and learn among all participants.

2. **Eye contact** - Sitting in a circle creates direct sight and sound lines among participants at all times making it easier to see and listen. In a circle no one is looking at anyone else's back.

3. **Multi-layered communication** - Circles permit participants to communicate verbally and non-verbally on many levels: physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual.

4. **Focus** - the structure of the circle places the attention of the participants on the task of the circle and reduces distractions.

5. **Connection** - the circle links all participants with one another encouraging a shared sense of effort or common purpose.

6. **Respect & Accountability** - By sitting in a circle everyone can see each other and disrespectful behaviour such as side conversations or demeaning non-verbal actions are discouraged and diminish.

7. **Inclusion** - No one feels isolated or left out. By going around the circle providing each person with a chance to speak ensures that everyone has an opportunity to be heard and reduces domination of discussion by a small number of people.

6. THE TALKING PIECE

- Spreads responsibility for peacemaking to all participants.
 - In traditional mediation, participants expect the mediator to control the dialogue. In the circle process the keeper does not interrupt the flow of the talking piece. Every participant carries responsibility to address conflict that may be arising between some participants in the circle.
- Reinforces the principle of equality
 - The talking piece provides an equal opportunity for all to participate and presumes equal capacity for contributions from all participants.
- Promotes better listening.
 - Participants listen better when they know that they will have their opportunity to speak when the talking piece reaches them. In open dialog we often stop listening and begin formulating our response before a speaker is finished because we are anxious about getting our opinion into an opening in the dialog.
- Encourages quiet people to talk.
 - The talking piece creates space for the contributions of quiet people who might otherwise not assert themselves to claim room in the dialog. These people often have valuable insights which are lost in an open dialog process.
- Encourages the use of silence in the process.
 - Participants feel more comfortable knowing that they are not being forced to participate.
- Manages discussion of very emotional issues.
 - Emotions can be expressed without the emotions taking over the dialogue.
 - Prevents two individuals from getting into a back and forth exchange.

7. MANAGING THE TALKING PIECE

1. Choose a talking piece that is acceptable or has special significance to the members of the group

2. Use the object chosen to be the talking piece only for that purpose.

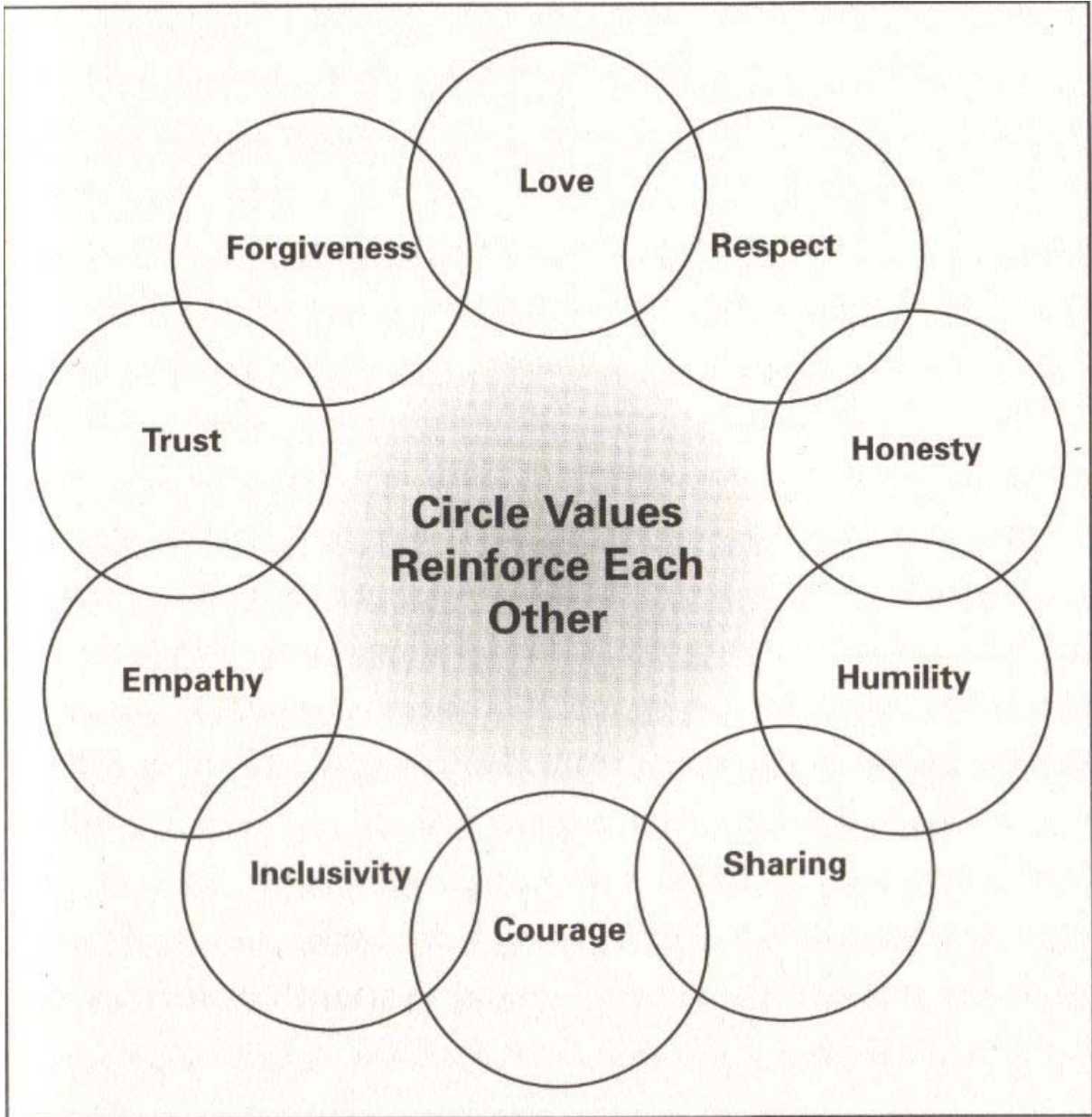
3. Once a Keeper poses a question to the members of the Circle, the Keeper needs to ensure that the talking piece is passed from person to person in order around the entire Circle. The Keeper may only comment or answer once the talking piece returns to him/her. The Keeper can then continue with another round of the circle on the same question or pose the next question. So that each person in the Circle has an opportunity to address the question.

4. Circle Keepers use the talking piece to ask a question to the whole group or to pass the Talking Piece to anyone in the Circle who has a question for the group.

5. The Talking Piece is passed only in one direction around the Circle per question.

6. The Keeper may use their discretion and put the Talking Piece down or simply hold it in order to open the discussion in a free flow format. However, the use of the Talking Piece should be resumed any time when the conversation gets heated, dominated by few participants, participants interrupt each other or start speaking or behaving disrespectfully towards one another.

8. PEACEBUILDING VALUES:



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9. PRINCIPLES OF A CONSENSUS-BASED CIRCLE PROCESS

Circles are consensus-based processes.

While the purpose, design and participants vary greatly from one circle to another, the following fundamental consensus-based process principles should be common to all peace circles:

- 1) Participation is based upon peacebuilding values
- 2) Participation is voluntary
- 3) Process is accessible to all equally
- 4) All participants have equal opportunity to participate
- 5) Process is transparent
- 6) Process is flexible taking into account the needs of each participant as much as feasible
- 7) Decisions are arrived at by the consensus of the participants
- 8) Participants are accountable for the decisions made by the group
- 9) Process is purpose driven
- 10) Process is designed by the participants

If we want group decisions to be sustainable, these principles should apply to the ways in which we deal with ourselves, with one another within the group, within our families and within our communities,

10. Core Circle Guidelines

- **Speak from the Heart:** Be honest and speak for yourself

- **Speak with Respect:** and be respectful even though you may not always agree

- **Respect the Talking Piece:** Speak only when you have the talking piece and respect

- **Respect others' right to speak:** Speak briefly if possible so that everyone else who want to speak has an opportunity to speak

- **Listen with Respect** and pass the talking piece without speaking if you so choose

- **Remain in the Circle**

- **Honour confidentiality:** what's shared in the circle stays in the circle

Each group needs to review these guidelines so that they are expressed in language that is familiar to the members of the group.

Additional guidelines may be added to identify specific behaviours which, when absent or present, facilitate the safety of the group.

For example, it may be helpful to do a couple of rounds of the circle group to identify the behaviours that each participant considers disrespectful within that group. In this way, the group will be able to identify the specific behaviours that will be deemed to constitute disrespectful behaviour within that group.

11. Instructions for Peace Circle on “Respect/Disrespect”

Instructions for Group leader or Circle Keeper/Facilitator:

Part One in a large circle:

- Introduce the reason for the circle: to consider the value of “respect”
- review the guidelines and
- open the circle with a reading.

Round one – Icebreaker : Introduce yourself and if you were an animal what animal would you be and why would you be that animal.

By circle facilitator: Introduce the subject for the session: disrespect

Round two: What do you consider disrespectful behaviour?

Name one behaviour that you would consider disrespectful and why.

Part Two: Divide large circle group into smaller groups (counting those present as 1, 2, 3 etc depending on the size of the large group so that the smaller groups each have about 6 participants)

Activities then continue in the smaller circles:

Round one: Introduce yourself again and name one positive quality in a person that you admire or respect and why do you admire that quality?

Round two: Describe a behaviour that you have seen take place in the school’s halls, library, cafeteria or courtyard, that you consider shows disrespect to another individual.

How do you feel when this happens?

Round three: Describe a strategy that you would use to deal with that negative behaviour.

Round four: Describe what you would consider an example of disrespectful behaviour by a teacher in the classroom. How do you feel when this happens?

Round five: Share with the group one strategy that you might use to deal with this behaviour.

Round six: Describe a behaviour that shows disrespect by a student towards other students and the teacher. How do you feel when this happens? How do you cope with it?

Round seven: Pick one of the disrespectful behaviours mentioned in the circle and suggest one strategy for the teacher or adult to use in dealing with the inappropriate behaviour.

Round eight: Of all the strategies you have heard to deal with disrespectful behaviour, are there any other strategies that you would try that were not mentioned?

Round nine (Closing question): What have you learned about disrespect today?

Close with a reading.

12. Sample of Questions for Peace Circles on Anger

1. Anger is a normal part of everyday life. What makes you angry?
2. What strategies have you used to deal with your anger?
Name one that has worked very well for you.

Break up the large circle into several smaller groups of about 6 students each.
(see instructions on Page 11)

Each member of the smaller circle has the opportunity to answer each of these questions. Each question should be taken in turn by sending the talking piece around the circle so that each of the participants can answer the question that is before the circle group at that point in time.

3. Within the last few days or weeks, what made you angry in the classroom?
4. How did you deal with this situation without being sent out of class?
5. Regarding your relationships with your family or friends: tell the group one thing that makes you upset and how do you manage this situation without having an argument or a fight?
6. Name one strategy that you are going to take away with you that you have picked up from other members of the group today.
7. How are you going to assist other students, friends, and relatives when they get angry?
8. How do you feel now after having participated in this Peace Circle? Why do you feel this way?

Close circle with reading provided.

SAMPLE READING TO CLOSE A PEACE CIRCLE

“STONE IN THE WATER” A Sioux Story

My grandfather took me to the fish pond on the farm when I was about seven and he told me to throw a stone into the water.

He told me to watch the circles created by the stone.

Then he asked me to think of myself as that stone person.

“You can create lots of splashes in your life but the waves that come from those splashes will disturb the peace of all your fellow creatures,” he said.

“Remember that you are responsible for what you put in your circle and that circle will also touch many other circles.

You will need to live in a way that allows the good that comes from your circle to send the peace of that goodness to others.

The splash that comes from anger or jealousy will send those feelings to other circles. You are responsible for both.”

That was the first time I realized each person creates the inner peace or discord that flows out into the world.

We cannot create world peace if we are riddled with inner conflict, hatred, doubt, or anger.

We radiate the feelings and thoughts that we hold inside, whether we speak them or not.

Whatever is splashing around inside of us is spilling out into the world, creating beauty or discord with all other circles of life.