

The Power and Challenge of Circles in Schools



WHY CIRCLES ARE SUCH A POWERFUL TOOL FOR BUILDING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Schools are intense, dynamic communities, continuously working out how participants are going to be together. How well participants are able to be together impacts all aspects of the success of a school. The Circle is a highly structured intentional space designed to promote connection, understanding and dialogue in a group. The Circle is a powerful tool for that basic community function of working out how we are going to be together, which includes building relationships, establishing norms, and working through differences. The Circle fulfills that basic community function: it holds a healthy balance between individual needs and group needs.

The more Circle is practiced, the more the students and adults in a school can carry that underlying philosophy into their interactions when they are not in Circle. When we are using Circle as a regular practice in the community, we are not just building relationships or solving conflicts. *We are practicing basic ways of being that are fundamental to being successful together.*

Much more is going on than just putting chairs in a circle.

Exactly WHAT is being practiced in Circles?

Respect

In Circle, each voice is given an opportunity to speak, and each person is listened to with focused attentiveness.

In a Circle, every perspective is valued as meaningful to that person.

Equality

In Circle, no one is more important or has more rights or power than anyone else; even if they choose not to speak, no one is invisible.

In Circle, the expectations are the same for the adults as they are for the students.

Empathy and emotional literacy

In Circle, we are nurturing and developing our capacity for empathy—our capacity to connect to and mirror others.

In Circle, there is greater opportunity to reflect on what you are feeling and to talk about your feelings than in normal conversations.

Problem solving

The practice of Circle carries an assumption that every participant has something to offer and that the presence of every participant is important for the good of the whole.

In Circle, we are operating from a place of confidence in the innate capacity of humans as a collective to work our way through difficult places without expert help.

Responsibility

Circles are a space for practicing responsibility with both words and actions. The physical structure of a Circle encompasses a non-verbal kind of accountability.

There is no hiding behind the desk, and no one is behind anyone else's back.

Self-regulation and self-awareness

Participants must wait to speak, listen without responding immediately, and delay their own need to speak. This is not our usual way of talking. It takes a lot of self-discipline.

Each participant is exercising self-control to make the Circle possible.

Shared leadership

The Circle allows the gathering of differences, holds space for multiple perspectives, and recognizes the existence of multiple truths. Every member is a leader, and every member owns the decisions of the Circle.

The Circle is a practice of fundamental democracy in which all voices are heard and all interests must be treated with dignity.

WHY CIRCLES ARE SO HARD

Circles are about a way of being together that is dramatically different from the routine habits of our culture. When we sit in Circle, we are “swimming against the current” of unconscious routines built into the very structure of the school day. These routines embody many unspoken rules and assumptions about how to behave and what is important in schools. Becoming aware of these unconscious assumptions will help us understand why the Circle practice, which is so simple to practice in kindergarten, is so challenging when we try and practice it elsewhere. This awareness also helps to reduce anxieties and natural resistances to Circle practice that often arise in the beginning of implementation, especially among adults.

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Circles ask us to slow down and be present for the Circle

In Circle, we experience a big slow down in the usual pace of interaction—no rushing or jumping to a conclusion—because every voice needs to be heard in full. Our usual interactions are rushed: we are always in a hurry and have no time to listen to each other (or ourselves) deeply. In our culture, we are rarely fully present in the moment, because we believe we must be doing many things quickly in order to meet expectations placed upon us.

In Circle, each participant's full presence is required—no multi-tasking, no texting, just full attention to the Circle. This is an exercise in patience and self-control for young people, but it also represents a significant change for adults. It is especially hard for adults who are charged with attending to multiple demands and believe they are rarely able to give their full attention to any one single conversation.

The equality of Circles is in tension with hierarchies

Our relationships mirror the structure of power in our society that is operating all the time. Schools are organized as strong hierarchies. The Circle is non-hierarchical. It is a space of equality. Circles challenge practices around power. An authority figure cannot control the process but must instead share power with all the participants. Circles only work if everyone in the Circle cooperates without the power-based intervention of the authority figure. This shift in responsibility takes some practice and challenges the strong need felt by authority figures, such as teachers and principals, to control the process, outcome, and the participants.

Circles ask for everyone to behave towards one another in an equally respectful manner. This means that adults in the Circle comply with the same guidelines as young people. Adults must sit in the Circle just as youth do. The adults cannot leave the room and then come back in. They must stay throughout the conversation and listen just as much as they are listened to.

Circles invite us to speak from the heart and deal with emotions

In our culture, we are socialized to keep conversation at a safe, impersonal level, especially in professional roles within the school environment. We often do not feel it is appropriate or safe to share our personal experience, thoughts, or feelings. Some adults in schools are uncomfortable with emotions. They may feel inadequate at responding to the emotions or may feel that they must fix any negative emotions.

The general privileging in our society of the mental over the emotional and spiritual has resulted in people feeling awkward, fearful, and embarrassed when speaking and listening about personal experiences, beliefs, and feelings. However, personal

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experiences, beliefs, and feelings impact everything we do, including our relationships with students. Sharing those can help students understand why we do what we do. Adults feel. Adults hurt. Adults have wisdom from their life stories.

Adults in Circle are expected to share from their hearts and from life experiences. This is a different relationship from what the adults normally have with the students and with colleagues, and it takes practice. Some adults find it hard to share personal experiences in ways that maintain the boundaries of their role. It is important to remember that, although the Circle process asks each to speak from his or her own experience, the process allows each person to decide the depth of sharing that he or she is comfortable with. Sitting as an equal in Circle does not mean giving up responsibility for being an adult: the sharing of one's experience is a healthy part of the relationship between adults and students. Adults are expected to be honest but also to share their emotions and experiences in a responsible way that protects the well-being of children.

Emotions in a Circle are accepted as what they are: a reality for that individual, but not necessarily the responsibility of anyone else in the Circle. Emotions are heard with respect and may be responded to with empathy, but they do not require the adult or anyone else to fix them. Other students are often highly skilled at responding to the emotions of their peers.

Circles ask us to prioritize building good relationships

Our culture prioritizes achievement over connection—acts of doing over the act of being in relationship with others, our own selves, or nature. In schools, this translates into an environment where time is scarce and must be dedicated to a demanding set of tasks associated with learning. In many schools, a rigid testing regime enforces the demand to stay focused on the priorities of mastering specific skills and content.

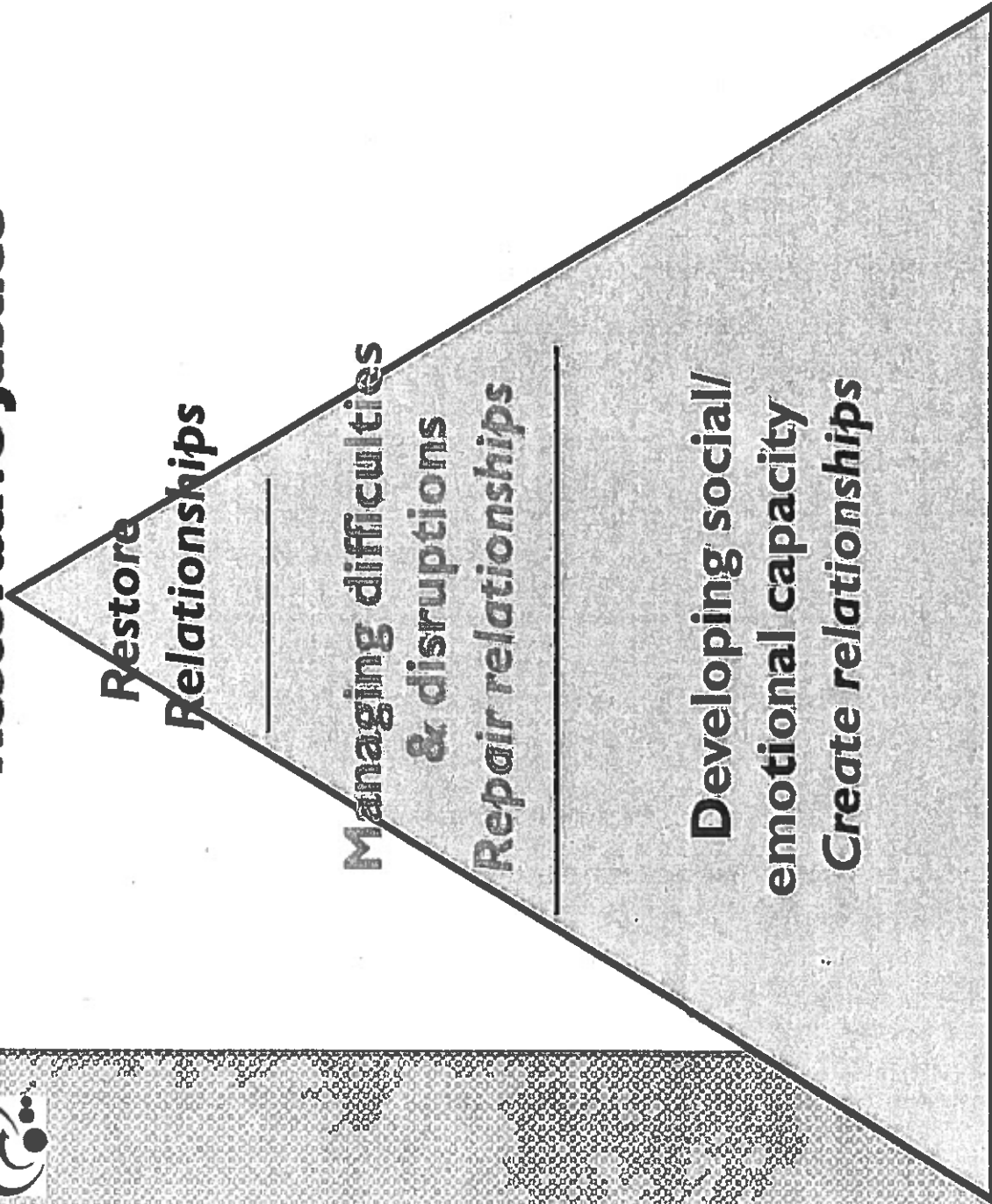
The time it takes to build quality relationships is low on the priority scale of most schools for very understandable reasons. Yet many of the recurring difficulties in school, which in the long run demand much time and resources, arise from the absence of positive relationships. Often trust is not present in schools. Youth don't trust adults; school staff may not trust administrators and visa versa. The greater the level of trust in a group, the more effective the Circle, yet building trust takes time. It is true that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Though building trust takes time, in the long run, it is worth the investment, because academic performance depends upon the safety and trust of relationships.

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Restorative Justice



◦ Tier 3:
Conferencing
Circles

◦ Tier 2:
Referral Based
Problem Solving
Conversation
Classroom Problem
Solving Circle
Restorative
Conversations

◦ Tier 1:
Affective
Statements
Community
Building Circles
Curriculum/
Academic Circles

Whole School Approach

--Brenda Morrison, 2007 (adapted for BPS)

TYPES OF CIRCLES

SEQUENTIAL GO AROUNDS

- This is a circle in which a question or discussion point is raised and students answer in turn, proceeding around the circle in either a clockwise or counter clockwise direction.
- It is best to establish the direction of the circle before the first person speaks. The teacher, a volunteer, or a person designated may go first.

NON SEQUENTIAL GO AROUNDS

- In this type of circle, conversation proceeds from one person to another in no fixed order.
- Ground rules should be established at the beginning so everyone understands the format. Student maturity level determines the intensity of structure.
- A talking piece may be used to keep order. Students only speak when they have something to say, which can be a disadvantage because all voices may not be heard.

FISH BOWLS

- An effective way to use circles with a larger number of participants.
- Allows certain participants in the inner circle to be active participants, while those in the outer circle act as observers.
- A common variation leaves one chair in the inner circle empty, so someone in the outer circle can sit in the empty chair to comment and briefly share in the discussion. The person then returns to their seat in the outer circle, allowing access to the chair by others.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING CIRCLE

- Purpose is to encourage students to be forthcoming about areas of confusion or misunderstanding, and develop a positive habit of asking for help.
- Using a fist of 5, ask how well students understand the material being taught. One finger means still lots of questions, five fingers mean full understanding.
- If full hand up, ask student(s) to share what they understand best.
- For students with questions, ask how they can be helped to understand better.

CHECK FOR WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW

- Purpose is to generate excitement and curiosity about a new topic by finding out what students already know.
- Ask students to share what they think or know about the topic.
- After they listen to others' responses, ask what they hope to learn.

- Ask if student has concerns or worries about learning the topic and what might be most helpful to them.

BUILDING VOCABUARY

- Prepares students for lessons with challenging or unfamiliar vocabulary.
- Show flashcards, PowerPoint slides, or flip chart with vocabulary words.
- Ask students to write a definition of the word on paper. Encourage them to guess if they are unsure or have no idea.
- Have each student around the circle share their guess, and say if they think another student's guess may be more accurate.
- After completing the circle, the teacher shares the definition/meaning of the word.

CIRCLE GAMES

- Games are used for group building, ice breakers, and trust activities. They can also be used to creatively cover academic material.
- Games are most successful when the goals and rules are stated at the beginning of the circle. Part of the introduction may be asking students for input on what appropriate behavior looks like during a game.

Follow up with student feedback on how the game went, if they liked it, what they got out of the experience.

SOME CIRCLE GAMES

- The big wind blows for...
- Fruit basket roll over
- Name game
- Count to
- Pass the talking piece as fast as you can
- This is my elbow
- Ball toss (up to 4)
- Bumpity Bump Bump (Right, left)

WELCOMING CIRCLES

- Ask students in the circle to respond to some or all statements/questions below, according to the situation.

- 1. Put your new student goggles on and share something that might be helpful for a new student to know.
 - 2. Tell ____ about a circle norm, classroom rule, or procedure.
 - 3. Share something that has happened in our class that _____ has missed.
 - 4. Please say "Hi" or a word of welcome to _____.
5. Please share something we did as a class while s/he was gone, or something that you learned that is important for _____ to know.

WELCOME BACK FROM DISCIPLINE ACTION

- If a student has been out of school as a disciplinary action, the student needs to reconnect with the school community in a positive way.
- Participants may include other students affected by the situation, parents, school staff, community volunteers, and supporters for the student.
- Disciplinary action circles reduce anxiety about the return of the student to the school by sharing perspectives or concerns; to affirm connections with multiple members of the school community; and to nurture a sense of unity toward success for everyone.

CIRCLE NORMS

- Respect the talking piece
- Speak and listen with respect
- Speak from the heart
- Confidentiality (Personal information shared in a circle is confidential except where safety is at risk)
- Remain in circle

FIST OF FIVE (5)

**5-FANTASTIC, GREAT,
VERY HAPPY**

4-DOING GOOD, HAPPY

**3-OKAY NOTHING
REALLY**

**2-NOT GOOD,
SOMEWHAT SAD/MAD**

**1-TERRIBLE, REALLY
SAD, MAD**

Community Building: Proactive Circles

Circles foster attentive listening, empathy, sharing, and equal opportunities of participation for all members, therefore, the circle process helps cultivate a strong sense of belonging.

Proactive Circles:¹

- Provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors.
- Are NOT held in response to an incident or problem.
- Ideally should account for no less than 80 percent of all circles a student experiences.
- Are based on topics intentionally selected and sequenced to increase risk-taking over time.
- Build the social capital necessary to support successful Responsive Circles.
- Are used to set up behavioral expectations prior to events that occur outside the regular classroom.
- Can be used to help students with academic goal setting and planning.
- Can be used to set ground rules for projects and activities.
- Can be used to build or monitor understanding of academic content.

Examples of Proactive Circles

Beginning-of-day/class circles: (adopted from the Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools)
Circles at the beginning of each day/class can help develop common understandings of guidelines, expectations, and values. They can also be used to address tensions or problems that may have arisen the day before. A daily circle process provides a chance to check in with questions or issues such as:

- How was your night? (High risk question)
- What's going on in your life right now? (High risk question)
- What are your thoughts or reflections on today's assignment?
- Clarifying details and expectations of daily schedules.

Anytime circles: (adopted from the Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools)

Circles can be used at any point when tensions or problems have arisen, or when decisions need to be made. They provide a problem-solving forum that teaches values such as honesty, accountability, responsibility, and compassion.

Possible uses include:

- **Curriculum:** enhance learning by providing an interactive forum for students to participate in the learning process. Examples include, content review, reading debriefs, topic discussions, goal setting, news articles, current events, books, controversial topics.
- Having fun or doing a cooperative activity such as telling jokes and story telling.
- Engaging in student-chosen discussion topics.
- **Student/Family/Parent Support/ Staff Support:** truancy, IEP, suspension reentry, peace circles (requested by students who need a safe place to vent emotion and receive support), parent meetings, staff meetings...etc.

¹ The International Institute for Restorative Practices: Whole School Implementation overview and essential elements

End-of-day circles: (adopted from the Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools)

- Circles are often used at the end of the day for purposes such as these:
- To share something that happened to each participant that day.
- To address a problem or conflict that has arisen during the day
- To address feelings and tensions that may have developed inside the classroom, in other areas of the school, or even in the outside world (ex. Disturbing events in the news).

Sample Prompting Questions/Topics for Circles

Please note: It is always important to carefully select which questions or topics to pose to the group depending on the needs of the group. The health of each member of the circle is always to be strongly considered.

*Be prepared and know that some of the circle prompts may bring up a lot of emotions for the circle members.

Getting Acquainted

- Share a happy childhood memory.
- If you could be a superhero, what super powers would you choose and why?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What would you not want to change about your life?
- If you could talk to someone from your family who is no longer alive, who would it be and why?
- If you had an unexpected free day, what would you like to do?
- If you were an animal, what animal would you be and why?
- Name two things or people who always make you laugh.
- I like to collect....
- If you could have a face to face conversation with anyone, who would it be and why?
- Describe your ideal job.
- Describe your favorite vacation.
- If you could change anything about yourself what would it be?

Exploring Values

- Imagine you are in conflict with a person who is important in your life. What values do you want to guide your conduct as you try to work out that conflict?
- What is your passion?
- What do you keep returning to in your life?
- What touches your heart?
- What gives you hope?
- What demonstrates respect?
- What change would you like to see in your community? What can you do to promote that change?
- A time when you acted on your core values even though others were not.

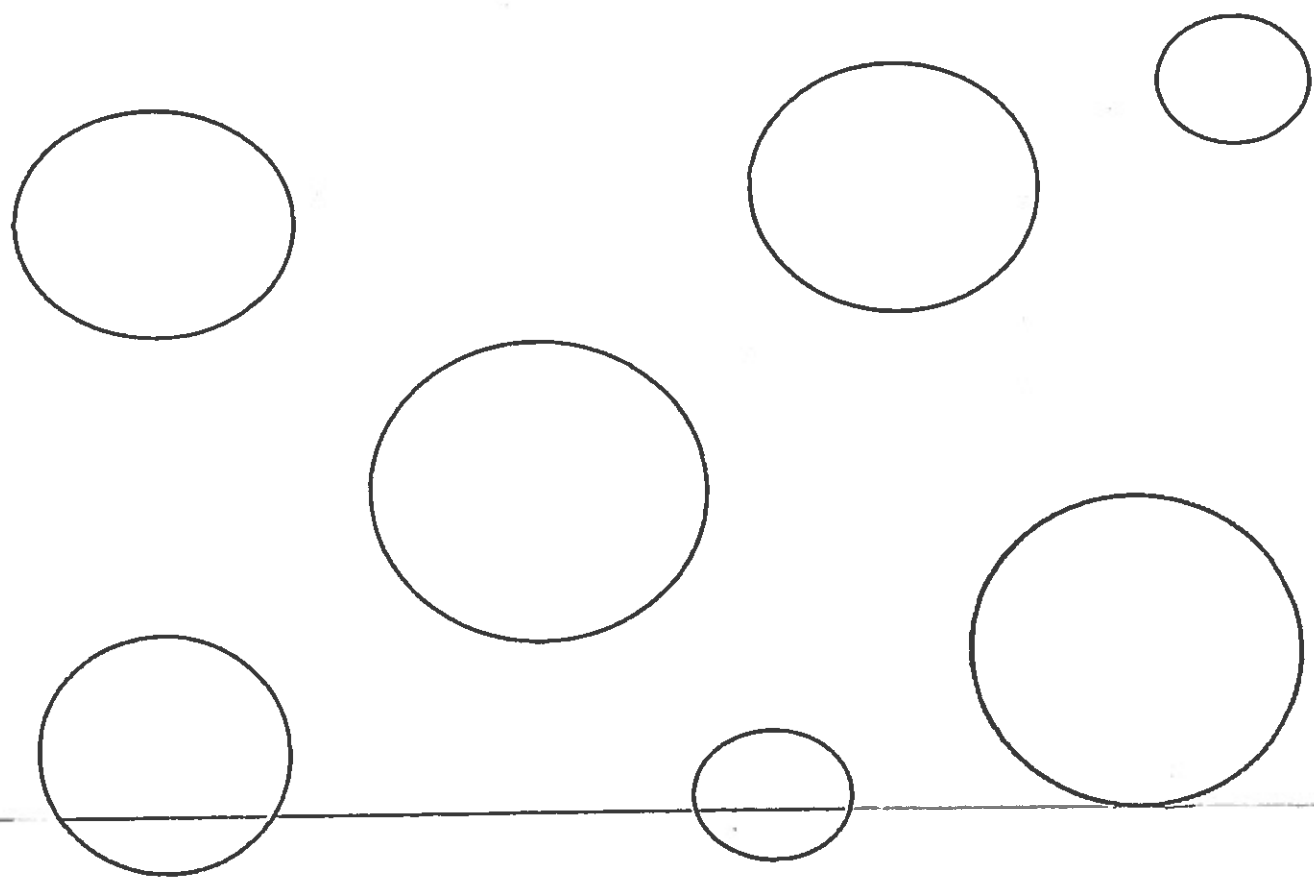
Storytelling from our lives to share who we are and what has shaped us (to build community)

Invite participants to share:

- A time when you were outside of your comfort zone
- An experience in your life when you "made lemonade out of lemons".
- An experience of transformation when, out of a crisis or difficulty, you discovered a gift in your life.
- An experience of causing harm to someone and then dealing with it in a way you felt good about.
- An experience of letting go of anger or resentment.
- A time when you were in conflict with your parents or caregiver.
- An experience where you discovered that someone was very different from the negative assumptions you first made about that person.
- An experience of feeling that you did not fit in.

Relating to Curriculum:

- The best/worst thing about this science project is...
- The main character in the book we are reading is like/not like me when...
- These math problems make me feel...



Additional Circle Starters:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I feel happy when...2. I feel sad when...3. I feel angry when...4. I feel scared when...5. I feel excited when...6. I feel stressed when...7. I feel alone when...8. The scariest thing...9. My favorite hobby...10. My favorite pet...11. My favorite food is...12. My favorite T.V. show is...13. My favorite weekend activity is...14. My favorite song is...15. My favorite sport is...16. My favorite color is...17. My favorite weather is...18. Rain makes me feel...19. Wind makes me feel...20. Sunshine makes me feel...21. I feel happy when...22. I feel sad when...23. I feel angry when...24. I feel scared when...25. I feel excited when...26. I feel stressed when...27. I feel alone when...28. The scariest thing...29. My favorite hobby...30. My favorite pet...31. My favorite food is...32. My favorite T.V. show is... | <ol style="list-style-type: none">33. My favorite weekend activity is...34. My favorite song is...35. My favorite sport is...36. My favorite color is...37. My favorite weather is...38. Rain makes me feel...39. Wind makes me feel...40. Sunshine makes me feel...41. Snow makes me feel...42. Fog makes me feel...43. Today I feel...44. When I think of blue, I think of...45. When I think of red, I think of...46. When I think of green, I think of...47. When I think of yellow, I think of...48. When I think of black, I think of...49. When I think of brown, I think of...50. When I think of white, I think of...51. If I were an animal, I would be...52. If I were a famous actor/actress, I would be ...53. If I were a famous athlete, I would be...54. When I graduate from high school, I want to ...55. When I become an adult, I want to...56. When I start my career, I want to ...57. I can't wait until...58. Friends are ...59. Families are...60. Putdowns make me feel...61. Appreciations make me feel... |
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**This material is adopted from Kristi Cole and Paul Dedinsky's packet of Restorative Justice Practices, Milwaukee Public Schools. Safe Schools/Healthy Students.

GAMES

BUMPITY-BUMP BUMP BUMP:

- Player 1 Points to a player in the circle and says one of two things: "Left," or "Right," followed immediately by the phrase, "Bumpity-Bump, Bump, Bump."
- Player 2 must make the correct response before Player 1 finishes saying "Bumpity-Bump, Bump, Bump."
- The correct response for the command "left" is the name of the person on Player Two's left; for "right," it's the name of the person on his or her right,
- If Player 2 responds correctly and in time, Player 1 repeats the process with another player.
- If Player 2 responds incorrectly or too late, s/he takes the center position.

THE BIG WIND BLOWS/MOVE YOUR BOOTY:

Question (Tell about one way you deal with stress during the holidays?)

- Everyone sits in chairs in a circle with one person in the middle (minus one chair). They're given a question to ask (i.e. something I learned today is?)
- The person answer the question and before they say "The Big Wind Blows (Move your booty) for _____" they fill in the blank with something like "wearing socks", "who has a birthday in September"... etc.
- Everyone who fits that description has to now go and find a new place to sit,
- The rules are that you must cross the circle, you cannot stay in their own spot, and you cannot go to the spot immediately beside them.
- The person in the middle tries to get a spot as well, this leaves someone in the middle who makes the big wind blow (Move your booty) again!

COUNT TO... (Number of people in circle)

- For example you have ten people in your circle. You need to count from 10.
- Only one person can speak at once.
- If two people speak you have to start over.
- Everyone in the group has to have one turn.
- The person next to you can't speak after you speak.

GAMES

- You cannot use hand gestures to know who is going next.

PASS THE TALKING PIECE AS FAST AS YOU CAN

- Everyone stands in a circle
- Timing the group, pass the talking piece from left to right as fast as you can.
- Everyone must touch the talking piece
- Try again, try to beat your time

THIS IS MY ELBOW

Demonstrate with one student in front of the class. Touch your ear and say "this is my nose," the student should respond by touching his/her nose and saying "this is my ear." The student then points to his/her elbow and says "this is my foot," the teacher responds by pointing to his/her foot and saying "this is my elbow." Instruct the students to get into pairs and continue in this way. This is a lot of fun and there is typically a lot of laughter. It is appropriate for high beginners to low-intermediate level students - it is not as easy as it appears, it requires good listening skills and concentration and it is an interesting alternative to "Simon Says" to reinforce body part vocabulary.

BALL TOSS

Basics:

- Stand in a circle. Go around the circle and have each person introduce him/herself.
- After everyone has stated his/her name, call someone's name and toss the ball to that person.
- The recipient must then call someone else's name and toss the ball to that person.
- Repeat until everyone in the circle has been tossed the ball once.
- Instruct them to remember to whom they threw the ball.

Advanced:

- Have the group toss the ball around the circle in the original order again. Make sure people throw the ball to the same person they did the first time around, continuing to state that person's name.
- Add a second ball and third ball so more than one ball is being thrown at a time.

GAMES

- Throw the ball in reverse order. Start with the last person and go backwards.

NAME GAME:

This is a rhythmic game with four beats. It is best if students are seated or standing in a circle; it can be done from class seats as long as everyone can see each other. On the first beat, everyone slaps both of their hands on their thighs. On the second beat, everyone claps both hands together. On the third and fourth beats, everyone snaps the thumb and fingers of first one hand and then the other. Say nothing on the first two beats. Say your own name on the third beat. Say someone else's name on the fourth beat. That person must then say his/her own name on the third beat.

Human Knot:

- Have a group of 10-15 stand very close together.
- Tell them to reach out their arms so all hands are jumbled and intertwined.
- Tell them to grab one hand for each of their hands, but not the one of the person's next to them.
- Now they are a human knot and must use teamwork to untangle themselves into one circle without letting go of their hands.

Fruit Basket Rollover:

- Seat players in a circle. One person stands in the center.
- Each player gives the name of a fruit. There can be duplicates.
- The person in the center must first answer the Restorative question.
- The person in the middle calls out the name of a fruit or description (i.e. all red fruits, all fruits that have a peel, etc.).
- Anyone choosing a fruit that fits the called out description, but leave their seat, cross through the circle and must find a new seat.
- The person in the middle also tries to reach one of the seats.
- The one left standing then repeats the process. He or she may also call "fruit basket rollover" and everyone must change seats.

Circle Planning Tool

Date _____ Duration _____

Facilitator/Circle Keeper(s) _____

Circle Type	<input type="checkbox"/> Proactive <input type="checkbox"/> Responsive <input type="checkbox"/> Formal conference <input type="checkbox"/> Sequential <input type="checkbox"/> Non-sequential <input type="checkbox"/> Fishbowl
Set Up	<input type="checkbox"/> Large circle <input type="checkbox"/> Small circle <input type="checkbox"/> Fishbowl <input type="checkbox"/> Conference Seating Arrangement
Materials	<input type="checkbox"/> Talking piece <input type="checkbox"/> Center piece <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
Plan	Description
Introduction & Purpose	Times
Agreement & Talking Piece	<input type="checkbox"/> Establish or review group norms/agreement/behavior expectations <input type="checkbox"/> Explain or review talking piece norms (speaking and listening)
Opening Prompt/Question: <i>Check-in, Ice Breaker, Intros, etc.</i>	
Discussion Questions/Prompts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relevant ▪ Simple & clear ▪ Open ended ▪ Energizing ▪ Not leading ▪ Give voice ▪ Invite stories ▪ Focus on feelings ▪ Keep on topic 	Round 1: Round 2: Round 3:
Closing Prompt/Question: <i>Check-out, Reflection (Personal or Process), Commitments, etc.</i>	
Notes	