

Circle Solutions for Schools and Communities - Handout

Circle Solutions provides a framework for healthy relationships and a positive pedagogy for learning them.

It is based on research evidence found in the fields of mental health and resilience, positive psychology, neuroscience and effective educational practice. The framework can be used in many different ways and for all ages from young children to adult.

Circle sessions establish understanding, values and behaviours for 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' that are reinforced outside these sessions in schools and community contexts.

Circle Solutions is based on the **ASPIRE** principles:

Agency: Participants are given structured opportunities to take decisions on things that concern them and responsibility for making things happen. Students themselves build a positive emotional climate for learning

Safety: No-one has to say anything if they do not feel confident or ready to do so. Safety is also enhanced by discussing issues not incidents and by using the third person. Activities are in pairs, groups or the whole Circle

Positivity: The focus is on strengths and solutions - what we want, rather than what we want to get rid of. Circles actively promote positive feelings, including laughter. This enhances emotional resources and connectedness

Inclusion: There is an expectation that everyone will work with everyone else. No one is left out and all are encouraged (without pressure) to join in. Every person is important to the group

Respect: Participants listen to each other and do not take up more than a fair share of attention. There are only personal positives and no put downs.

Equity: Everyone has an equal voice, no one person can dominate. Facilitators participate in all activities

These principles are reflected in the guidelines and the way Circles are facilitated. These principles also need to be modelled and reinforced outside the Circle.

Circles are a safe and positive way of developing:

- self awareness, knowledge and skills
- knowledge, understanding and acceptance of others
- pro-social behaviours
- a sense of belonging and connectedness
- a focus on positive, solution focused thinking
- resilience, increased emotional resources and well being
- collaborative decision making, conflict resolution and problem-solving
- whole child, whole school wellbeing

Participants - including the facilitator - take part in a wide range of paired, small group and Circle activities, many presented as games. Participants are mixed up so everyone interacts with everyone else.

There are three **guidelines** based on the principles

- **everyone gets a turn: when it is someone's turn to speak everyone else will listen**
- **individuals may 'pass' if they wish: there is no pressure to say anything**
- **the focus is on strengths and personal positives: there are no 'put downs'**

Circle Solutions is an indirect teaching tool. The aim is for participants to think reflectively and creatively, discuss important issues (never specific incidents), grow to have understanding about themselves and others and over time develop social and emotional understanding and skills they can put into practice.

If Circles are run with too didactic an approach, where adults tell children and young people what to think and do, they may not be so effective in the long run, as this undermines agency and responsibility. Circles are intended to be fun!

Circles need to happen regularly to have an impact. The minimum is one session a week although some schools are providing a short daily session. Length depends on the age of the students but averages between 20 and 40 minutes. It is about building a sense of connectedness and the skills to relate well.

Circle Solutions requires a positive approach from adults and skilled facilitation congruent with the basic principles. There are now many resources available for Circle activities though some may need adaptation.

Outcomes:

Evaluations indicate that relationships between students, class ethos, behaviour, confidence, communication skills and teacher student- relationships change in positive ways. The impact of Circles also generalises beyond the classroom. The quality of facilitation is central to these outcomes as is making the links between what happens in Circles and everyday life in the classroom, school and community

The Rationale for Circles – how they lead to school wellbeing and a more effective learning environment

- Raising self-awareness and promoting emotional and social competence increases the chance of healthy relationships.
- Focusing on strengths and the positive makes people feel better about themselves and others. This enhances emotional resources and promotes resilience.
- Seeking what is shared increases tolerance and provides a threshold for friendship - this inhibits bullying behaviours.
- Having fun together promotes a sense of belonging and reduces stress.
- Constructing solutions together raises responsibility for making them happen.
- Building on strengths supports positive change.
- Everyone gets a turn to contribute, promoting cooperation
- A happier and more connected class promotes an effective learning environment
- Student engagement and positive behaviour enhance teacher effectiveness and wellbeing



What happens in a Circle session?

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Circles are not a stand-alone intervention. Circle sessions are the place for students to share stories, make decisions and embed positive values. What happens in a Circle determines the quality of interactions and student engagement at all other times.

NB Not every activity will happen in every Circle except where marked 'essential'

- Reminder of the guidelines: Essential
- Greeting / opening activity
- Mix up activity: Essential
- Pair share or interview and feedback
- Whole group game
- Small group activity
- Calming activity to close: Essential

The Activities

Successful circle sessions include a variety of activities, none of which goes on for too long. Circles usually take around half an hour, longer with older students. The content of Circles will depend on the age and needs of the participants.

Circles begin with a reminder of the principles, followed by a **greeting** activity in the round such as introductions, name games, or 'pass the smile'. An object such as a 'talking stick' can symbolise each person's turn to speak

Sentence completions are safer in the third rather than first person. These can introduce the theme of the Circle or just be for sharing experiences, feelings or solutions, eg:

- The best thing that happened in the last week is ...
- It helps someone to feel good at school when ...
- A put down means ...

Silent statements enable more difficult information to be shared in a safe way – eg:

Everyone stand up and change places if:

- you know someone who seems to be lonely
- you think people sometimes don't know what to say in a situation
- sometimes it is OK to feel angry.

Mixing people up ensures students interact with those outside their usual social groups. This happens several times a session and can be done in a many ways, such as asking those who have a particular eye colour to change places. Mixing up games add energy to the Circle. Young people like to be physically active and not sit still for long periods.

Pair shares are a regular feature of Circle Solutions. They are aimed at participants finding things in common and getting to know each other differently, eg talk about a film you have both seen – what did you think of it? What are you both good at? This breaks down stereotypes and promotes acceptance of difference.

Small group or paired activities can be creative activities, sharing experiences, finding commonalities, problem-solving, structured discussions, drawing or games. Small group work is particularly useful for developing actions to promote positive feelings and inclusion in the group.

Games are an essential feature of Circle Solutions. They are highly engaging for children and young people. Although sometimes the aim of the game is simply to have fun together to promote a sense of belonging, others are meaningful at deeper levels of understanding and/or provide opportunities to practice developing skills. Some games are collaborative, others may have team competitions.

Stories trigger questions /discussion of issues with time for reflection. These can be visual, such as YouTube clips

Role play explores issues, generates strategies, promotes empathy and provides opportunities to both think about issues and practice skills.

Hypotheticals enable students to work together to understand a situation and make decisions to address it.

Closing circle sessions: the circle always ends with an activity that is calming and enjoyable, such as a relaxation activity, reflection or guided visualisation.

NB: Circle Solutions is not a program, it is a process: the content is flexible according to the needs and development of the group.

Circles build Solutions: A class may address an issue in one Circle and this leads to activities and decision making in subsequent Circles.

There are many ideas for Circle activities. A resource list is at the end of this handout though some activities may need adaptation to be congruent with the ASPIRE principles. Circle facilitators are encouraged to share ideas on the **Circle Solutions Facebook page:** www.facebook.com/groups/1834701303424143/

The role of the facilitator includes raising awareness of learning outcomes.

Suggested ways of enhancing learning in Circles

- Point out commonalities - what we all share
- Highlight positive feelings and how these are achieved
- Make links between games and real life events - focusing on the positive
- Use some games to develop actions that encourage students to take responsibility.
- Provide time for reflection and discussion on learning as a circle activity
- Structure the content of Circles so they build on each other and concepts are revisited, expanded and put into practice.
- Display work developed in Circles in public places
- Refer to Circle learning when incidents arise at other times - ask questions that require reflection

Circle Solutions is not intended to be group therapy. The use of the third person, stories, discussing issues in the abstract and focusing on the positive helps maintain safety. This addresses one of the main criticisms of social and emotional learning.



Circle facilitation

The role of the Circle facilitator

The way in which Circles are run is central to their effectiveness: a skilled facilitator aims to do the following:

- guide the process to be congruent with the underlying principles and values
- participate fully in all activities and model expected behaviour
- emphasize the need for respect and safety for all
- have positive expectations
- choose activities appropriate to the age and stage of the students
- have variety in activities
- repeat guidelines to everyone rather than singling out individuals
- introduce activities so that everyone understands what to do, and give opportunities for questions and practice where appropriate
- comment briefly on aims of activities and summarize achievements
- make connections for students with real life situations
- acknowledge all contributions
- be aware of time issues and maintain an effective pace
- provide occasional energisers so participants move physically
- be creative and prepared to be flexible if the need arises
- be sensitive to individual circumstances where possible
- offer opportunities for students to lead
- offer choices to students who resist conforming to the basic guidelines.
- REINFORCE the learning whenever possible outside the Circle sessions .

No-one should be mandated to run Circles. If a teacher does not yet acknowledge that positive relationships make a difference to the quality of the learning environment, pro-social behaviour, resilience and wellbeing they are unlikely to run Circles effectively. This is also true if they believe that their role is to 'control' students rather than encourage their participation and agency.

A whole school approach ensures that teachers share their experiences, resources and ideas for Circles. It also means that the Circle philosophy is embedded throughout interaction in the school to build social capital. Circles are not seen as an 'extra' that can be jettisoned for other priorities.

Suggested Circle Format

This is not set in stone apart from the statement of the guidelines and mixing people up. Aim for a combination of reflection and fun.

You may not be able to fill all categories in a short Circle session.

ACTIVITY	SPECIFICS:	RESOURCES: Timing
Statement of the guidelines		
Greeting / opening activity		
Mix up activity		
Pair share / interview		
Sentence completion/ silent statement		
Small group activity. Leave enough time for feedback if that is part of the plan		
Whole group game		
Calming closing activity		

Ensure everyone in your group has an opportunity to do some of the facilitation.



Resources

Research on Circle effectiveness

Brenda Dobia, Roberto Parada, Sue Roffey & Madelaine Smith: *Social and emotional learning: From individual skills to class cohesion*, Educational & Child Psychology, 36(2)

Circle Solutions Resources

Sue Roffey (2024) *ASPIRE to Wellbeing and Learning for All in Early Years and Primary*. David Fulton Publications

Sue Roffey (2024) *ASPIRE to Wellbeing and Learning for All in Secondary Settings*. David Fulton Publications

Sue Roffey (2020) *Circle Solutions for Student Wellbeing*, 3rd Edition - Sage Education - this key text has a chapter on the ASPIRE principles, as well as numerous games, sentence completions, opening, closing and mixing activities. The Sage Education website also has related online activities. Available from Sage Publications or Amazon, including in Kindle format. This revised edition has many new activities, so the 2014 edition is still relevant for the games etc included in it. Multiple copies of this book are available at a significant discount.

E-book: <https://www.ebooks.com/en-gb/searchapp/searchresults.net?term=Sue+Roffey>

Physical Book:- <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/author/sue-roffey>

Sue Roffey (2019) *The Primary Behaviour Cookbook* and *The Secondary Behaviour Cookbook* - Routledge - these have numerous Circle activities to address specific behaviours across the whole class.

Sue Roffey (2011) *Changing Behaviour in Schools: Promoting Positive Relationships and Wellbeing* - Sage Education. Has Circle activities at the end of each chapter.

Sue Roffey & Russell Deal (2015) *Strengths in Circles: Building groups that flourish and fly* - Innovative Resources - this set of cards and accompanying workbook addresses how to put the Circle Solutions ASPIRE principles into practice.

St Luke's Innovative Resources - well produced cards to inspire, encourage and promote reflection and discussion. Strengths, symbols, community, futures. www.innovativeresources.org. Get their catalogue. **NB Circle Solutions Registered Schools have a 20% discount if they become Gold Members.**

Many of St Luke's resources are available in the UK from www.innovativeresources.co.uk: **use code GGSWW at checkout for a 20% discount.**

Games, Games, Games: A co-operative games book - available from the Woodcraft website <http://woodcraft.org.uk/images/games-games-games-book>

atmybest.com/strengths-cards - beautifully produced cards with great photos on one side, so multiple uses beyond strengths identification

corambaaf.org.uk/bookshop/strength-cards-kids - written by Russell Deal

www.incentiveplus.co.uk/feelings-emotions-cards - and other resources for social and emotional learning

use code GGSWW at checkout for a 20% discount.

Margaret Armstrong & David Vinegrad (2016) *Working Circles: in Primary and Secondary Classrooms*. Available from Amazon

Karen Brunskill has written four books with activities dealing with issues of respect, confidence, assertiveness, consideration and tolerance from early years to Year 9. Published by Sage

Tina Rae has written many books on aspects of emotional literacy across the age range. They contain activities that can be used or adapted in Circles - all published by Sage Education

Catherine Corrie (2nd ed, 2009) *Becoming Emotionally Intelligent* - Network Continuum

Robyn Hromek (2005). *Game Time: Games to promote social and emotional resilience for children age 4-14* - Sage. These board games are designed for small groups.

See also:

Growing Great Schools Worldwide: www.growinggreatschoolsworldwide.com

Circle Solutions Facebook page: www.facebook.com/groups/1834701303424143/

WellbeingStories.com

These are 6 stories for 9-13 year old students dealing with loss and depression, anxiety, transition, organisation, entitlement, and negativity and perfectionism. For each story there is a Family and a Teacher Toolkit. The Family Toolkits go into more depth about the issue the story is addressing, and suggest ways families can help. Each Teacher Toolkit gives one or two whole class **Circle Solutions activities** for each of the ten chapters of each story. You can download the Introduction to the stories free from www.wellbeingstories.com.

To be congruent with the ASPIRE principles, activities in many 'Circle Time' books may need to be amended so they are completed in pairs or small groups, address issues rather than focus on personal experience, and use the third person - eg sentence completions that begin "A good friend would ..." or "It is OK to feel sad when ...". Students will often talk about their own lives, but this framework provides a safer space and addresses the critique of SEL becoming therapeutic education.

Early Years and Primary

Annie Greef (2005) *Resilience: Personal Skills for Effective Learning Vols 1 and 2* - Crown House Publishing

Avril McDonald (2016) www.feelbrave.com - stories & teacher resource book for 4-7 year olds - Crown House

Frederika Roberts & Elizabeth Wright (2018) *Character Toolkit for Teachers* - Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Jane Langley & Bill Hansberry (2013) *The Grab and Go Circle Time Kit for Teaching Restorative Behaviour* - Inyahead

Secondary

Marilyn Tew, Hilary Potter & Mary Read (2007) *Circles PSHE and Citizenship* - Sage

Marilyn Tew (2007) *School Effectiveness. Supporting Success through Emotional Literacy for Ages 11-16.* - Sage

Dianne Schilling (republished 2014) *50 Activities for Teaching Emotional Intelligence : Level 2 (Middle School) Level 3 (years 9-12)* - Inner Choice

Trainer Programs : Embedding Circle Solutions as a Tool for Wellbeing

For those who want to train staff in their own school or community setting.

Trainer the Trainer programs are designed to embed Circles in whole-school settings. This two day program gives accreditation and provides all the materials you need to train staff within a receptive context. Details available on www.growinggreatschoolsworldwide.com/csn.

NB: Attending this introductory day is a pre-requisite to the Trainer

Related courses and consultation

Growing Great Schools Worldwide offers a range of services for educators, schools and parents on wellbeing issues, including behaviour, resilience, relationships and leadership. For more details and related publications see www.growinggreatschoolsworldwide.com. Enquiries to admin@sueroffey.com