

# Restorative Justice Talking Circle Guide



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**Restorative Justice Talking Circle Guide**  
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## Types of Circles

All circles have the same structure but the purpose, outcome, and participants determine the type of circle.

### **Talking Circles or Community-Building Circles**

The purpose of Talking Circles, or Community-Building Circles, is to create bonds and build relationships among a group of people who share a common interest or community. Talking Circles allow all voices to be respectfully heard and offer participants diverse perspectives to stimulate their reflections. In a talking circle, participants can:

- Explore an issue or topic from many different perspectives.
- Build relationships
- Support collective action and mutual responsibility.
- Recognize accomplishments or celebrate a job well done

### **Peace Circles or Restorative Discipline Circles**

These circles bring together the person who has been harmed, the person who caused the harm, family and friends of each, community members and sometimes school personnel. Participants discuss 1) what happened 2) why it happened, 3) what the impact is, and 4) what is needed to repair the harm and prevent it from happening again. An agreement is determined by consensus and may also stipulate responsibilities of members of the school community as part of the agreement.

### **Healing Circles**

These circles bring together individuals who have been affected by a specific incident or set of circumstances and create a space to talk about that issue. Like peace circles, healing circles may discuss a topic and the impact that it has on the participants, but the goal is healing and connection. It may not include specific action steps for participants. For example, a healing circle could bring together the families of two people involved in a fight or a group of teachers who need a space to express emotions about the death of a student.

Adapted from Kay Pranis' *The Little Book of Circle Processes* (2005).

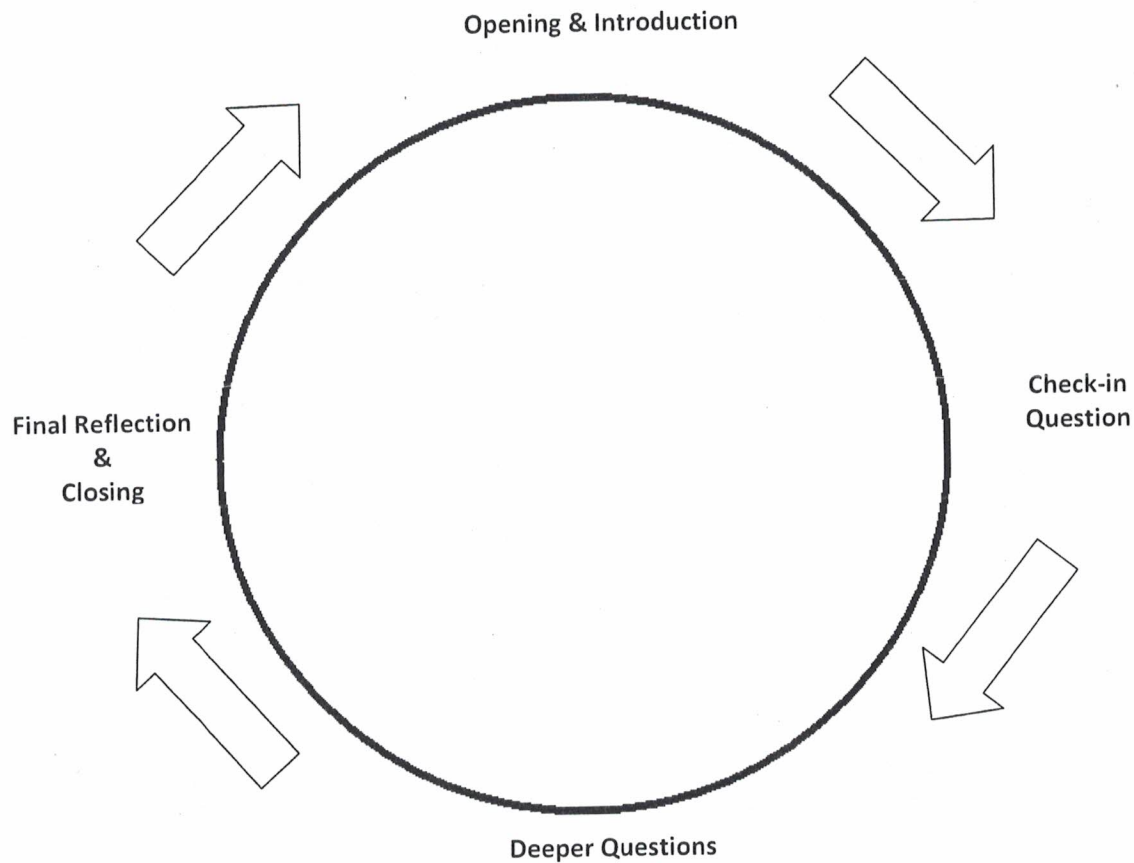


## Key Elements of the Circle Process

<b>IN CIRCLE FORM</b>	Everyone sits and forms a circle shape. This allows everyone to see everyone else without reinforcing 'sides'. With no tables in the way, all body language is obvious to everyone. No one should be outside the circle looking in.
<b>CIRCLE KEEPER(S)</b>	One or two people facilitate the circle process and establish and maintain the tone. The keeper(s) does not control the issues raised and does not steer the group to a particular outcome, but helps the group reflect through questions and create inclusive conversation.
<b>TALKING PIECE</b>	An object with some significance to the Circle Keeper or to the group that is passed around the circle to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak.
<b>CENTERPIECE</b>	An artifact placed in the circle center that creates a shared center and grounds the circle. It also acts as a focal point and gives participants a place to look when discussing difficult issues. Possible circle centerpieces include a plant, a candle, small rug, statue, etc.
<b>OPENING RITUAL</b>	A ceremonial act that indicates the beginning of the circle and helps to transform the circle space into a special and intentional process. Possible opening rituals include: a moment of silence, reading a poem or quote, playing music, or ring a chime.
<b>GUIDELINES</b>	<p>Rules that help create a shared sense of responsibility for the outcome of the circle. Guidelines are an essential element in maintaining a peaceful tone.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You may only talk when you are holding the talking piece</li> <li>▪ Speak from your heart and listen with respect</li> <li>▪ Everyone gets an opportunity to speak, and you decide whether you want to share</li> </ul>
<b>VALUES</b>	Values are named and agreed on by the participants. They are ways of being that can be written down and added to the centerpiece as a reminder to participants during the conversation.
<b>Prompts/Questions</b>	The Circle Keeper asks prompting questions about the main theme of the circle. Every member of the circle has an opportunity to respond to it each round, including the keeper.
<b>CLOSING THE CIRCLE</b>	The Circle Keeper briefly reflects on what was said and makes meaningful connections, thanks participants for sharing, and closes with a ritual similar to what they used to open the circle. This establishes a distinct end to the process, which helps participants transition out of the circle and back into everyday life.

## Overview of Circles

Circles create a space where everyone can be heard. Circles can be used to build community, start or end the day, celebrate, and reflect on difficult issues.



### What to Consider When Choosing a Circle Question:

- Does this question apply to everyone in the circle?
- Is it an open-ended question?
- Does it invite sharing from personal experience or from the heart (vs the head)?
- Does it further the purpose of this circle?
- Could participants be ready to answer this question honestly in front of each other?
- Am I ready to model the kind of response I want for this question?

## Sample Talking Circle Prompts

### 1. Check in = Break the ice with a light and easy question

- What has been the highlight of your week so far?
- What are you thankful for today?
- How have you been positive today?
- Describe your mood or feeling today.
- If you could have one super power, what would it be and why?
- What is your favorite: T.V. show, color, book, movie, hobby etc.
- If you could be an animal, what animal would you be and why?
- Between 1 and 10 (with 1 being terrible and 10 being great), how are you coming to the circle today?
- What is a food that reminds you of home?
- If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?
- If you could solve one of the world's problems, what would it be?
- What motivates you?
- What is one thing that you love to do now?
- What is something that you've always wanted to do, but have never had the chance?

### 2. Create Circle Guidelines = Establish the values that will make the circle a safe space

- What does "safe space" mean to you?
- Who in your life motivates you to be a better person? *Give all participants a notecard and ask them to write down the name on the card. Go around the circle and have each person share why they chose that person and then put cards in center of circle, face up.*
- Think of someone you trust. What are some characteristics about that person that makes you trust them?
- What is one trait/skill that you can bring to the circle?
- What do you need from this group in order for the circle space to feel comfortable/safe? *The Circle Keeper records this on a post-it board as "rules for circle". Does everyone agree to what the other people need? (pass talking stick for verbal YES, you just made the rules for the group)*

### 3. Circle Prompts = Explore substantive topics

- Give an example of turning a negative situation into a positive one
- If you could change your school, how would you change it?
- How would you describe yourself as a person?
- Who is someone who inspires you?
- If you could go back and change one thing about your life, what would it be?
- How does peer pressure (negative and positive) affect you?



### Circle prompts continued...

- If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
- What is your biggest fear?
- What is a quality of a good friend?
- How do you handle anger and frustration?
- What does community mean to you?
- Why does respect look like?
- What is one goal that you want to achieve in your life?
- Think of someone you know who seems like they are going down the wrong path or making some poor choices. What would you wish you could say to them to get them back on track? Don't say their name.
- What is the impact of violence in your community?
- What are the obstacles that prevent you from success?
- Complete the following sentence, "If I was braver, I would ..."
- Complete the following sentence, "If you really knew me, you'd know..."
- How do other people see you? Is that accurate?
- What do you hesitate to admit about yourself?
- What areas of your life are most /least satisfied with?
- Where do you get energy from?
- Who is/was the best teacher that you ever had and why?
- What takes energy away from you?
- When do you feel the most "natural"?
- Where are you meeting resistance in your life right now?
- What are you most passionate about?
- What do you value above all?

#### 4. Checkout = Reflection and transition out of the circle

- What are your reactions to the circle?
- How do you feel about what we discussed?
- How will the circle effect your communication?
- How can you apply what you learned in the circle to help you and your friends?
- What are the obstacles that prevent you from success?
- What is your biggest strength?
- What is one positive thing that you can do before the end of the day today?
- What is one word that describes how you're feeling right now?
- What is one thing that you are taking away from the circle today?

## Tips for Circle Keepers

### *Bringing the Class into Circle:*

- o Be mindful of where students sit in Circle. Have a highly participatory student sit next to you to help the Circle start off strong. If certain students need to be separated so that they can focus, try to do that before the Circle starts.
- o If two or more Circle Keepers or adults are participating, both need to know the plan for that day's Circle and what role each will play. Adults should sit across from each other so that, halfway through a round when they have the talking piece, they can reflect on how the Circle is going by acknowledging students, summarizing what has been said, and refocusing on the topic, reminding the group of values and guidelines and shifting the tone through their own storytelling when needed.
- o In order to keep track of time, the Circle Keeper should sit facing a clock or use a watch.

### *Model the Participation You Would Like to See:*

- o When the Circle Keeper authentically shares, it makes it safer for others to do the same. The Circle Keeper sets the tone for the whole group. If the Circle Keeper shows reverence for the process, other participants will follow suit.
- o Model the ability to reserve judgment as this helps build a safe space for all. Take note of students who are not focused or following directions, but resist redirecting them when you don't have the talking piece. Even then, restate expectations to all students and praise positive behavior as opposed to shaming or singling out students who are struggling to meet expectations.
- o Resolve to interrupt the Circle ONLY to facilitate the continued passing of the talking piece.

### *Validate Listening as much as Speaking:*

- o Participants are always given the choice to share or not. It is vital to understand that one doesn't have to speak in order to be an active participant. By being an active listener, respecting guidelines, and respecting others in the Circle, the silent student is still actively participating.
- o Students will share when they feel ready and safe. A student might be handed the talking piece and hold it for a few moments, silently contemplating what they might share, and then pass it without saying anything. That is still a successful round and given time, participants will feel more comfortable and will share when they are ready.

### *Be Prepared for the Stuff that Comes Up:*

- o It's important to have links with other community resources so that if serious issues come up in the group, you can help to connect them with therapy, counseling, or other resources. See the Self Care section for tips on how to make sure you adequately prepare yourself for this aspect of keeping Circles.



*If Conflict Arises in Your Circle:*

- o Remind participants to speak from their own experiences and feelings rather than being concerned with what others are doing or thinking.
- o Disagreement is okay and it is bound to happen—you don't have to agree with or like what people are saying or doing, but you must respect their right to have their thoughts and feelings.
- o If the Circle is not feeling safe, then the keeper can decide to break the Circle, have the group take a break, do a reflective activity such as journaling, and then come back to the Circle.

*Monitor the Time Closely Throughout the Circle:*

- o Pay attention to how long it takes for the talking piece to get around the Circle so that you can introduce the final round question with enough time for everyone to answer.
- o If the previous rounds have taken longer than anticipated, you can shorten the next round by asking for one-word answers. If you run out of time in the middle of a round, explain that you'll plan to continue the discussion at the next Circle. At the next Circle make sure you start where you left off.

*After Circle:*

- o After the Circle is closed, continue in a calm, positive tone, providing clear directions for students' dismissal from Circle and expectations for moving desks and chairs back where they belong.
- o Just after the closing can be a good time to check in briefly (one to two minutes) with individual students about how they experienced the Circle. This is especially true if there was deep or highly personal sharing.
- o Connect students to any additional supports or resources if needed.

## **Empowering Students to Become Circle Keepers**

In any classroom where Circles are an integral feature, the students can be given the opportunity to become Circle Keepers. Students urged to take on a leadership role will demonstrate a greater sense of ownership and pride in the process than if they remain only participants. When students are given legitimate opportunities and ongoing support to lead this process, they will take full responsibility and contribute willingly to promote its success. As students develop their Circle Keeping skills, they will also improve their ability to manage their behavior in school and at home. This skill building allows for the benefit of better classroom management and peer accountability. Becoming a Circle Keeper can be especially powerful for the most disengaged or challenging students, as they often have an enormous amount of untapped leadership potential. The role of Circle Keeper allows them to demonstrate that leadership and capture the attention of their peers in a positive and productive manner.

### **Ways to Start Involving Students from the First Circle:**

As the process becomes more routine, embolden them to take the lead on each component of the Circle: the opening; establishing values; reviewing the guidelines; asking the questions; and closing the Circle, so that the students are eventually facilitating the entire process.

- Assign each student a role in creating the Circle (putting down the cloth, gathering the talking piece, arranging the center piece, moving tables out of the way, arranging chairs); this not only helps assist in a smooth transition in and out of Circle, but also reinforces that from day one, this process belongs to the entire class.
- Ask the students to bring in their own talking pieces and share each one's story and significance in their lives, or make talking pieces as a class project and put them on display in the classroom.
- Partner students and ask each pair to select an opening and closing poem or activity for Circle, and then have pairs rotate responsibility for opening and closing the Circle.
- Once students are familiar with the Circle structure, ask them what questions or topics they'd like to talk about in Circle and have them write down their suggestions. Or place a box in the classroom where students can submit suggestions for you to review and select from before Circle.



## **Now What? Developing Your Circle Skills After Training**

Here are a few ideas to help you practice being restorative as part of your daily life so that you continue to build your skills over time:

- **Find a time and place to check in with yourself.** What are you bringing into the present moment that could affect your response? Is your response influenced by past interactions? What assumptions or ideals might you need to let go of in order to really listen? Regularly taking a moment to be at peace with yourself can make a difference as you work for peace at your school.
- **Practice asking questions that elicit stories from people in your life** (family, friends, co-workers).  
After each conversation, reflect on what you did that worked and didn't work.
- **Look back on your life and write down stories** that help you empathize with different feelings and situations students may be experiencing or that inspire people to be their best selves.
- **Be on the lookout for new stories** in your daily life that might be useful in Circle. Collect or create talking pieces associated with your stories.
- **Find a Circle to be a part of!** The best way to get good at keeping Circles is to BE in lots of different Circles.
- **Seek out professional development** on Restorative justice practices. Chicago Public Schools makes these available and free for school staff, and the Chicago Teachers Union Quest Center also offers training on restorative justice. Alternatives, Inc. provides citywide and school specific trainings in restorative practices.
- **Share your circle successes!** Culture shift at your school requires that this idea spreads! Advocate for your administration to provide training for staff and adopt restorative discipline practices.

## Sample Circle Openings and Closings: Poems, Quotes and Visualizations

From **"Rose that Grew from Concrete"**

"You see you wouldn't ask why the rose  
that grew from the concrete  
Had damaged petals. On the contrary, we  
would all celebrate its  
Tenacity. We would all love its will to  
reach the sun.

Well, we are the roses – this is the concrete – and these are  
My damaged petals. Don't ask me why,  
thank God n---, ask me how!"

- *Tupac Shakur*

From **"Our Deepest Fear"**

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness,  
that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves  
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually who are you *not* to be?  
You are a child of God.

Your playing small  
Does not serve the world.  
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking  
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

And when we let our own light shine,  
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear,  
our presence automatically liberates others.

— *Marianne Williamson*



### **"Diamond Mind"**

The promise of our dreams comes true  
When patience minds our goal;  
Remember that the diamond once  
Was just a piece of coal.

- *Charles Ghigna*

"If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it."

- *Toni Morrison*

"You are not just a drop in the ocean. You are the mighty ocean in the drop."

- *Rumi*

"Deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light."

- *Theodore Roethke*

"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."

- *Anais Nin*

"I change myself, I change the world."

- *Gloria E. Anzaldúa*

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

- *Michael Jordan*

### **Family Connections Visualization**

I invite you all to take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly as I speak. Close your eyes if that is comfortable. Imagine around us a circle of your ancestors – grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great grandparents – who care deeply about you. Imagine them looking at us with love and pride... They surround us, hold a circle of protection and love... Feel their support and their complete acceptance of you as you are... See the light in their eyes as they look at you with unconditional love... Bring your attention back to your breath. Breathe deeply and slowly three more times... Return your awareness to this room and our space together, bringing with you the love given by your ancestors. Breathe deeply, knowing that they can see the core goodness in you.

Remain silent for a few minutes.

- *Kay Pranis, Circle Forward, pg. 383*

