



Circle Practices to Foster Community, Engagement, and Discussion

What to do: Review the circle practices, purposes, and functions described below. Decide which practices might work well in your program. Identify specific ways to introduce the practices to students and provide opportunities for practice.

Why it matters: Incorporating circle practices into your program builds community and gives everyone equal voice and responsibility. Whenever a challenging situation arises, you and your students will be ready to address it in your circle.

Community Circles

A community circle is, at its core, a safe space for discussion. It differs from a group discussion by its specific intent to build connections and trust. Facilitators and students participate equally. Community circles motivate and engage students by empowering them to express their ideas and opinions in a safe, nonjudgmental space. Here are essential components to a community circle:

- **Circle:** All participants face each other, with no physical barriers between them.
- **Talking piece:** This is an object held by the person who's speaking. It should be something easy to pass from one speaker to the next, like a feather, pebble, or ball.
- **Facilitator:** The facilitator is usually a teacher or another adult, but it can be a student.
- **Student-centered aspects:** From setting the agreements (norms) to carrying out the discussion, all aspects of the practice should be student led.
- **Routine:** There's a list of steps for the group to follow while holding a community circle. The list may include things like doing certain movements or stretches, reciting a poem, or opening and closing circle time a certain way.

Conversation Circles and Circle Practices: A Brief History

From gathering around the family dinner table, to having coffee with friends, to sitting around a campfire looking at the stars, humans have been gathering in conversation circles since the beginning of time to share wisdom, discuss events, tell stories, and solve problems. The terms *circle groups*, *circle practices*, *reflective circles*, and *restorative circles* are used in a variety of ways and circumstances, but all draw from society's rich history. The common denominator is the circle, a shape that gives everyone equal voice and responsibility.



Restorative Circles

Students walk into your program each day having experienced a variety of issues that may weigh heavily on their hearts and minds. Restorative circles aim to help students process their thoughts and feelings so that they can be more present and engaged during program activities. Establishing restorative circle practices enables students to build relationships and skills they can use to support one another and face challenges as they arise. Restorative circles are frequently used in place of punitive discipline. They're most effective when they're an integral part of the school and/or out-of-school time program culture.

Key elements of restorative circles are similar to those of community circles. Program staff should:

- Create an emotionally safe, supportive space for all participants.
- Prepare for “when, where, and what” to discuss, whether you’re the facilitator or a participant.
- Select a focus area, theme, or topic in advance.
- Schedule appropriately to allow time for all to participate.
- Develop an opening routine and a closing ceremony to help participants transition (mentally, emotionally, and/or physically) into and out of the circle.
- Encourage students to connect within the circle by sharing personal stories or insights.
- Use a talking piece to denote and honor the speaker at a given time.
- Model empathy by acknowledging, summarizing, and paraphrasing contributions as appropriate, and encourage students to do the same.
- Develop the concept of “being an ally” (using your voice, influence, or presence to support another person).
- Look at issues on a systems level, if age appropriate.

Circle Practices

Be responsive to students’ backgrounds, experiences, cultural perspectives, traditions, and knowledge. For example, the [Navajo Nation Math Circles Project](#) brings mathematicians into schools to mentor teachers and students and to facilitate interesting math activities that draw on Navajo culture and traditional ways of knowing. A [six-minute video](#) shows how these math circles work.

We cannot help young people understand each other when we don't understand ourselves and how we've been shaped to view the world.

— Erica Buchanan-Rivera



Implementing Community or Restorative Circles

Start simple. Developing the desired discussion and interactions within your circle takes time and trust. Let participants get the feel by discussing something that will elicit differing opinions yet feels like a “low risk” topic — for example, a favorite movie, or whether they prefer the beach or the mountains. Here are some examples of possible questions and topics to get you started:

- If you could live anywhere, where would it be?
- If you could visit any time and place in history, where would you go?
- What motivates you?
- Talk about something happening in the world that concerns you.
- Talk about something happening in the world today that excites or inspires you.
- Name something you’ve never done but would like to try.
- What makes you feel like you’re an important part of our program?
- What felt fun, easy, or natural for you today? What felt weird, scary, or challenging?
- When have you felt confident (e.g., connected, powerful, positive, hopeful, safe, supported) about something, and what do you think helped you feel that way?
- What do the words *justice* and *injustice* mean to you? How do you think we can create a more just program, community, and world?

To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk.

— Thomas Moore

This resource was developed in 2024 by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at 21stcclntac.org. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

