

Purpose of Sharing Circles

When used regularly, the process of the Sharing Circle coupled with its content provides students with frequent opportunities to become more aware of their strengths, abilities and positive qualities. In the Sharing Circle, students are listened to when they express their feelings and ideas, and they learn to listen to each other. The Sharing Circle format provides a framework in which genuine attention and acceptance can be given and received on a consistent basis. Both teacher and students have the opportunity to be learners and teachers in Sharing Circles.

By sharing their experiences and feelings in a safe environment, they are able to see basic commonalities among human beings and individual differences too. This understanding contributes to the development of self-respect. On a foundation of self-respect, they then grow to understand and respect others and in the process, develop concern for humanity that is necessary to becoming responsible members of our human family.

As an instructional tool, the purpose of the Sharing Circle is to promote growth and development in students of all ages. Targeted growth areas include communication, self-awareness, personal mastery and interpersonal skills.

As students follow the rules and relate to each other verbally during the Sharing Circle, they are practicing oral communication and learning to listen. Through insights developed in the course of pondering and discussing the various topics, students are offered the opportunity to grow in awareness and to feel masterful, more in control of their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Through the positive experience of give and take, they learn more about effective modes of social interaction. The Sharing Circle provides practice in the use of basic communication skills while relevant life issues are being discussed and valuable concepts learned.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative practices is a philosophy that believes that people are fundamentally good and want to do the right thing and that decisions are best made and conflicts best resolved by those most directly involved in them. The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices is simple – that human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them. Restorative practice creates opportunities to learn in all situations and encourages people to take responsibility for their behavior. It is a way of being in relationship with others.

Restorative practice uses affective statements and affective questions to encourage students to take ownership of their behaviors. Circles and small group conferences can be used to facilitate discussions around curriculum, specific topics, issues that arise in the school and or in the world or to resolve conflict at an informal level. For a more formal approach to conflict, conferences can be set up to include all parties affected by the conflict, so that all parties have a voice and can work together to come up with solutions and ways to repair the harm and the relationships.

The foundation of restorative practices is circle dialoguing. Running circles on a regular basis in a classroom creates community and a climate of caring. Students learn many social skills and life tools from the experience of sitting in circle with each other. Utilizing circles for check in's and check out's, to process curriculum, to address events in the world, in the school or in the classroom and to resolve conflict, teaches children they are part of a community and that their behavior has impact on other people's lives.

When restorative practices is used to resolve conflict it's goals are to:

- Attend to the needs of all the people harmed and the person who did the harm.
- Foster an understanding of the impact the behavior had on others through personal reflection.
- Offer an opportunity for those who committed the harm to repair the harm they caused and repair the relationships

All of which help people learn from the conflict.

The Foundational Theories for Circle Practice in Schools

1) The Whole Child Approach: Social Emotional Learning
Non cognitive factors are as important or even more important as cognitive ones.

Circle attends to the whole person and provides space for emotional, social and moral development along side the mental and physical.

2) The Importance of Relationships in Development and Learning:
Attachment theory in psychology; choice theory in education; the ethic of care within moral philosophy and social control theory within sociology, are among the relevant theories that identify the quality of the bond between adults and children as a key to learning and healthy human development.

Circle is a process for building relationships. Circle will strengthen trusting caring relationships between adults and children.
- Children don't care what you know, until they know that you care. -

3) Whole School Approach: Positive School Climate, School Connectedness
A sense of belonging and a connectedness among students and adults to the school community.

Circle process is a space designed to promote a sense of belonging, to cultivate awareness and consideration of others. Very helpful in generating a positive school climate.

4) Positive Discipline:

Circle is a structured process for addressing harm that meets the needs of those harmed, while promoting accountability and responsibility for wrongdoers. Circle uses the conflict as an opportunity to strengthen positive relationships.

5) A Trauma-Sensitive Learning Environment: Focuses on trauma or adverse childhood experiences and their impact on learning and human development.

An environment in which a child feels appreciated and cared for by adults at school; the classroom and school environment is emotionally and physically safe, and clearly articulated standards for behavior are reinforced through positive interventions and relationships with adults and peers.

Circle can be part of what schools provide as sanctuaries in the lives of stressed children and adults by creating the space for ongoing relational connection. It is simple, cost-effective and transformative.

6) Mindfulness Practice: A wellness Technique with a long tradition within human societies.

Scientific research confirms what thousands of years of human wisdom and practice has long affirmed: the regular use of simple mindfulness practice enhances mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Research on mindfulness within schools shows that simple techniques can improve the quality of attentiveness and calm focus within a classroom.

Circle process itself is mindfulness practice because it encourages participants to slow down and be present with themselves and others.