



Circle Time for social emotional learning

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Felicity became an early years educator in 1997 and has taught classes from Prep through to Year Three. In 2009 Felicity joined the North Coast Region Behaviour Support Team as a Behaviour Support Consultant. This role was unique in its brief to Engage Early Learners (EEL initiative), with a focus on working pro-actively with teachers, administrators and schools around behaviour challenges in Prep. Felicity has specialised training in functional behaviour assessments, non-violent crisis intervention, essential skills for classroom management, classroom profiling, restorative practices, Circle Time, mediation, Fun Friends and more.

Most educators are familiar with the need for their students to develop appropriate social skills. In my role as a behaviour support consultant, I have had many requests for a specific program or set of steps that will hopefully assist to develop the social and emotional literacy of selected students or groups. Some schools are choosing to adopt Circle Time as a framework for developing these skills and are experiencing extremely positive results for both the students and their teachers.

The use of circles for social purposes is evident throughout history and in a range of cultures. It has long been a way for people to come together and demonstrate unity, equality and inclusion and to participate in decision making. They have been utilised by the business world since the 1960s and became popular in education in the 1970s (Roffey, 2006).

Circle Time is evidence-based and serves as a framework for developing social emotional literacy, whilst also building and improving relationships. Authors such as Jenny Mosley, Sue Roffey, and Theresa Bliss have developed fantastic resources for schools to use in order to implement Circle Time. It has been shown to enhance self awareness, self esteem, resilience, emotional intelligence, anger management and communication skills, a sense of belonging and connectedness, empathy, conflict resolution and problem solving skills and it's fun.

Circle Time is not solely intended for use as a behaviour management tool. However, when implemented effectively, students develop knowledge and skills that may, in turn, have a positive effect on their behaviour. Many schools actually use circle time daily as they find it has a calming effect on the students, particularly after recess. However, even the most beautifully behaved classes can benefit from Circle Time.

During weekly Circle Time participants sit on chairs, preferably of equal height, in a circle and take part in a planned set of activities led by a facilitator for approximately 30 minutes. The time can vary depending on age, skill levels and a range of other factors. A typical session would include a reminder of the Circle Time rules, a meeting up activity, warming up activity, opening up activity, cheering up activity and a calming down activity (Mosley, 2005).

Circle Time rules

In my work with Circle Time in the early years, I have found it useful to break up the rules as follows:

1. **We listen** (eyes watching, ears listening, lips closed, hands in laps/back on chairs/feet still)
2. **One person speaks at a time**
3. **We can pass**
4. **Speak respectfully.**

I also have found it beneficial to take photos of the students in order to create visual supports that illustrate the desired behaviours, which are placed in the centre of the circle. In most classes that I have worked with, I have also used a whole group reward system to acknowledge appropriate behaviour. A chart is placed in the middle of the circle with a set number of spaces to be filled. Stickers are added when appropriate behaviours are observed. The whole class is then entitled to a negotiated reward. This reinforcement is not ever linked to the quality of an answer, as this may create undue pressure on participants. I have often found it another great tool for bringing the group closer, as they are all working towards achieving the goal together.

Meeting up

This is usually a game or activity to mix participants up, get the group working together, release tension, create a sense of fun and possibly reinforce a rule or routine. A strategy often used is the silent statement. This is where participants listen to a statement, stand to indicate their response and then move to another seat in the circle.

Warming up

This often involves the use of a talking object, which is something that participants use when it is their turn to speak. Participants in this step will often take part in a 'round', where they finish a sentence or give single sentence responses to a question. This gives people the chance to hear their voice out loud in a less intimidating format. Generally, if participants have chosen to pass, the talking object will go around again. This allows reluctant students to listen to peer responses and have extra time prior to contributing.

Opening up

This is often the key moment in Circle Time as it provides a forum for groups to come together in order to discuss issues, share concerns, explore thoughts and ideas, generate solutions, share perspectives, set goals and communicate with each other. This section of the circle is also a vehicle for participants to learn those valuable social skills in a forum that is relevant and meaningful. It is extremely important that participants adhere to the Circle Time rules and

that everyone feels safe. Generally, due to the intense nature of this section of the circle, it is recommended that facilitators do not end Circle Time sessions at this step. Students require a cheering up or calming down activity in order to have closure.

Cheering up

This section often involves acknowledging and celebrating successes, giving and receiving compliments and can involve games similar to the meeting up phase, in order to make a clean break from the heavy emotional work undertaken in the opening up phase.

Calming down

The last stage is useful in assisting the transition back to regular classroom activities. It provides an opportunity for participants to have a few minutes to take part in visualisations, relaxation activities and can even include quiet games. I have also found this time to be a great opportunity to teach self calming strategies for use to manage difficult emotions.

The facilitator is an important component of Circle Time and can often be a factor in the success or failure of sessions. The role of the facilitator is to:

- Collaboratively develop rules and explicitly teach expectations
- Carefully plan Circle Time sessions – making them progressive, varied and fun
- Ensure participants feel safe and included
- Participate and model desired behaviours
- Make the connection between games/activities/sessions and learning
- Facilitate rather than control.

When implemented with integrity, Circle Time has been proven to deliver a range of benefits to participants. One of the things I love most about it is how readily students and teachers embrace the sessions and the amazing moments that can happen in those 30 minutes.

References

Mosley, J. (2005) *Circle Time for Young Children*, Routledge

Roffey, S. (2006) *Circle Time for Emotional Literacy*, SAGE Publications Ltd