

Overview of Peacemaking Circles

Peacemaking and Talking Circles are a structured process used to bring people together to better understand one another, build and strengthen bonds and solve community problems. Talking circles and peacemaking circles provide a way for people to have conversations and to work through conflict or differences in a safe and productive way. The talking and peacemaking circle process is being used for decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution in schools, neighborhoods, workplace, family and the juvenile and criminal legal systems.

Peacemaking Circles are a way of talking together where:

- Everyone is respected
- Everyone gets a chance to talk without interruption
- We explain ourselves by telling our stories
- Everyone is equal – no person is more important than anyone else

Peacemaking Circles are useful when two or more people:

- Need to make decisions together
- Have a disagreement
- Want to work together as a team
- Wish to celebrate
- Wish to share difficulties
- Want to learn from each other

The Circle is a container strong enough to hold:

- Anger
- Frustration
- Joy
- Truth
- Conflict
- Opposite opinions
- Strong feelings

Everyone sits in chairs placed in a circle facing each other, without a table or other furniture between them. An object called a 'talking piece' is passed from person to person around the circle. Each person has a chance to speak when they have the talking piece. Everyone else listens without interruption until the person with the talking piece finishes and the talking piece is passed to the next person who then may speak.

Respect is very important in the Circle:

- Speaking with respect

- Listening with respect

Circles allow us to balance ancient wisdom about being in community with modern wisdom about honoring individual needs, interests and differences.

The Talking Piece

The talking piece creates space for the contributions of quiet people who might otherwise not assert themselves to claim room in the dialogue. The people often have valuable insights which are lost in an open dialogue process.

The talking piece spreads responsibility for peacemaking to all participants. In traditional mediation, participants expect the mediator to control the dialogue. In the circle process, the keeper does not interrupt the flow of the talking piece, thus every participant carries responsibility to address conflict which may be arising between some participants in the circle.

The talking piece promotes better listening. Participants listen better when they know that they will not have an opportunity to speak until the talking piece reaches them. In open dialogue we often stop listening and begin formulating our response before a speaker is finished because we need to rush into an opening in the dialog.

The talking piece encourages the use of silence in the process.

The talking piece reinforces the principle of equality in the circle because it provides equal opportunity for all to participate and presumes equal capacity for contributions from all participants.

Advantages of the talking piece:

The use of the talking piece helps to manage discussion of very emotional issues. Emotions can be expressed without the emotions taking over the dialogue. Because participants must wait for the talking piece to speak, they cannot respond without thinking. Because the talking piece must go around the full circle, it prevents two individuals from getting into back and forth emotional exchange. If the words of one participant anger another, multiple members of the circle may address the issues raised before the talking piece reaches the angry participant, thus relieving the angry participant from a sense of needing to defend him/herself alone.

Role of the keeper

- Create an atmosphere of respect and safety for all.
- Create a tone of hope and optimism for constructive solutions.
- Guide the process to remain true to underlying values.
- Articulate the progress and accomplishments of the circle as it proceeds. Clarify unresolved issues to focus the circle's energy.
- Participate as a community member.

Peacemaking Circle Process

Peacemaking circles provide a process for bringing people together as equals to talk about very difficult issues and painful experiences in an atmosphere of respect and concern for everyone. Peacemaking circles create a space in which all people, regardless of their role, can reach out to one another as equals and recognize their mutual interdependence in the struggle to live in a good way and to help one another through the difficult spots in life.

Peacemaking circles are built on the tradition of talking circles, common among indigenous and aboriginal people, in which a talking piece, passed from person to person consecutively around the circle, regulates the dialogue. The person holding the talking piece has the undivided attention of everyone else in the circle and can speak without interruption. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, deeper listening, thoughtful reflection, and an unrushed pace. Additionally, the talking piece creates space for people who find it difficult to speak in a group. Drawing on both traditional wisdom and contemporary knowledge, the circle process also incorporates elements of modern peacemaking and consensus building processes.

Participants are seated in a circle of chairs with no tables. Sometimes objects with meaning to the group are placed in the center as a focal point to remind participants of shared values and common ground. The physical format of the circle symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection, and inclusion. It also promotes focus, accountability, and participation from all.

The circle process typically involves four stages:

- Acceptance – The community and the immediately affected parties determine whether the circle process is appropriate for the situation.
- Preparation – Separate circles for various interests (family, social workers) are held to explore issues and concerns and prepare all parties to participate effectively. Thorough preparation is critical to the overall effectiveness of the circle process. Preparation includes identifying possible supporters in the natural network of the family to participate in the process.
- Gathering – All parties are brought together to express feelings and concerns and to develop mutually acceptable solutions to issues identified.
- Follow-up – Regular communication and check-ins are used to assess progress and adjust agreements as conditions change.

At any stage multiple circles may be held to complete the tasks of the stage.

Circles are facilitated by keepers who are responsible for setting a tone of respect and hope that supports and honors every participant. All circles are guided by the following commitments participants make to one another:

- What comes out in circle, stays in circle – personal information shared in circle is kept confidential except when safety would be compromised.
- Speak with respect – speak only when you have the talking piece; speak in a good way about good and difficult feelings; leave time for others to speak.

Peacemaking Circles Format

Value of circle format for discussion, brainstorming or problem:

1. Shared leadership, equality – Placing everyone in a circle minimize structural distinctions between “teacher” and “learner” and sets a tone of equal participation and equal capacity to teach and learn among all participants.
2. Visual contact among all participants at all times – In a circle no one is looking at anyone else’s back. It is easier to listen and hear when there are direct sight and sound lines among participants.
3. Focus – The structure of the circle focuses attention on the participants and task of the circle and reduces distractions.
4. Connection – The circle links all participants to one another encouraging a sense of shared effort or common purpose.
5. Respect/accountability – Because everyone in a circle can see everyone else, disrespectful behavior such as side conversations or demeaning non-verbal actions are discouraged. If it happens it becomes obvious to everyone in the circle.
6. Input and participation from all – Use of the technique of going around the circle providing each person with a chance to speak ensures that everyone has an opportunity to be heard and reduces domination of discussion by a small number of people.
7. Inclusion – In a circle no one feels isolated or left out.
8. Guidelines -- Circle participants to meet the needs of the group create guidelines. Guidelines institute a covenant defining how people will interact and share space and time as a group.

Applications of Peacemaking Circles

Circles built on the fundamental guiding principles can be adapted for many different kinds of situations and circumstances involving decision making, problem solving, support networks, resolving conflict, building trust and brainstorming. For example, Circles have been used for:

- Child abuse and neglect cases to develop support systems for the family and to develop a plan for the family which keeps the child safe
- Neighborhood tensions
- Classroom management and school discipline
- Developing education plans for special education students
- Family conflicts
- Juvenile and adult sentencing
- Support and assistance for victims of crime
- Brainstorming to build solutions for public issues
- Reintegrating inmates into communities upon leaving prison

In schools Circles can be used to:

- Uncover problems or concerns of students that might interfere with learning at an early stage
- Resolve conflicts
- Build relationships in the classroom
- Promote discussions in which everyone participates
- Develop shared agreements
- Build group problem solving capacity
- Assess student level of understanding and engagement with a topic
- Enhance speaking and listening skills
- Listen with respect – actively listen with your heart and body

Key concepts of Peacemaking Circles

Circles are based on an assumption of positive potential: that something good can always come out of whatever situation we are in.

Circles assume that no one of us has the whole picture: that it is only by sharing all of our perspectives that we can come closer to a complete picture.

Circles assume that we are unlikely to tell our deepest truths unless we feel respected and safe. Circles attempt to create safe spaces.

Circles make possible respectful and reflective dialogue even in very emotional situations.

Circles allow people to be who they would like to be in their best inclination.

Circles use storytelling to learn more about each other and us.

Circles are an intentional space and need to be created intentionally.

Circles are fundamentally democratic – allowing equal space for all participants to speak and to have voice in any decisions made.

Circles consciously engage all aspects of human experience – spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. Ceremony and ritual are used in the opening and closing of a circle to mark the space of circle as a sacred space in which participants will be present with one another in a different way than in an ordinary meeting.

Key Principles of Circles

While the design, procedures and participants vary greatly from one circle to another, there are some fundamental principles common to all circles.

Participants

- 1) Act on personal values
- 2) Direct participation

- 3) Voluntary involvement
- 4) Respect for all and all things
- 5) Self design
- 6) Equal opportunity to participate
- 7) Shared vision

Process

- 1) Inclusive to all interests
- 2) Easily accessible to all
- 3) Flexible to accommodate each case
- 4) Holistic approach
- 5) Spiritual experiences respected
- 6) Consensus outcomes
- 7) Accountability to others and to process

In the circle process social institutions play important roles, but the process is centered on the community context of the situation. The circle throws a wide net to capture possible points of support or assistance and to gather all relevant knowledge. Potential contributions are expected even from those who are part of the problem. Multiple issues are dealt with at once. Circles recognize that the issues interact with one another and cannot be effectively dealt with in isolation. Circles promote mutual responsibility, the recognition that individual well being depends upon the well being of all.

Adapted from: "Establishing shared responsibility for child welfare through peacemaking circles" by Kay Pranis and Barry Stuart in Family Group Conferences, edited by Buford and Hudson.