

Primary Schools

CIRCLE TIME *A Whole School Approach*



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About Circle Time

Much has been written of Circle Time in recent years, and as a teaching strategy it has seen increased use in Primary schools. However, it is not new. When a school considers Circle Time there are a number of issues that are key, which are worthy of consideration:

- Circle Time is not a subject
- Circle Time is a tool, it is an active teaching strategy
- To work best Circle Time should be developed across the key stages
- It should be used regularly, not spasmodically
- Circle Time should be developed in a planned way to address key issues within PSHE/Citizenship
- It can also be used reactively to address specific issues
- Lunchtime supervisors will find it a useful tool as a focus for active games or as a mechanism to resolve difficulty or conflict
- It can be used occasionally in staff or governors meetings

Circle Time is part of an overall **whole school strategy for behaviour management**.

Where Circle Time is developed across the key stages, in a planned developmental way, many teachers report that it makes significant impact, in developing children's skills and attitudes. Even the most challenging children respond to Circle Time and find it a very positive, empowering experience.

Some teachers remark that children will say what they think **you** want to hear in the circle, then disregard what they have said outside of the circle, for example in the playground. Remember, this strategy takes some time to develop. It is part of a **whole school approach**, and it needs to be supported by other active strategies in the playground, and throughout the school.

Schools differ in their expertise with Circle Time. Often, there are those who have tried it, and who value its contribution to behaviour management. Also, there may well be some teachers who feel unsure about the strategy and who are personally uncomfortable with it. The following 'rough guide' is intended to 'kick start' Circle Time, to be helpful and reassuring to all.



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CIRCLE TIME OR GROUP THINKING

What is Circle Time

Circle Time is a teaching strategy which is seeing increasing use at all key stages. As a strategy Circle Time is not new and it can be traced back to North American Indians. For many years circle time has been used widely in industry, to engender a co-operative approach to problem solving which involves personnel at all levels. In recent years, the world of education has adopted this strategy as it can be key to developing self-esteem amongst pupils.

Circle Time in school

Circle Time is a teaching strategy which allows the teacher to explore issues of concern. Also, it allows children to explore and address issues which concern them. It provides a structured mechanism for solving problems, in which all participants have an equal footing. Circle Time affords the opportunity for the teacher and class to communicate with each other about issues which promote self-esteem and positive behaviour. Circle Time should not be regarded as a sanction, and as children begin to understand the mechanism, they will ask the teacher for a Circle Time session when they think it is necessary.

Starting Circle Time

Sit the children and yourself in a circle. The seating arrangements can be:

- On chairs
- On a carpeted area
- In the hall
- In the classroom
- In the playground
- On a grassy area

Some teachers consider Circle Time to be difficult to manage, given the constraints of the timetable or the geography of their classroom. However, schools can work to be creative to overcome these problems. Increasingly, school halls and other spacious areas are used for CircleTime.



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The Start Up Phase

Initially the children are directed to make a circle. The circle shape is very important as an oval or square simply ensures that some children are left out. In the under five's class Circle Time should last for about 10 to 15 minutes. At Key Stage 1 it will probably take from 20 to 30 minutes and in Key Stage 2 from 30 to 60 minutes. Circle Time should be a whole school approach across the key stages. As it develops and increases, childrens' skills will develop and the time they need will extend. When beginning Circle Time with older pupils you may find the above times need to be shorter. It is suggested that circle time should be undertaken regularly, preferably on a weekly basis with younger children and fortnightly with older pupils.

Initial activities

Children need to understand how the circle works. Here are some suggested activities which you might like to try and it would be helpful if the teacher gives a guide by starting off the activity, which represents a simple round.

- Hello my name is
- Close eyes and pass around soft toy
- Pass round simple clapping sounds
- Holds hands and pass a message by squeezes

The Golden Rules

These are the rules by which circle time will proceed most effectively. Ideally the pupils could make up their own rules although there are some rules which are sacrosanct. Such as:

- You can only talk when you are holding the talking stick (with younger children this should be a soft toy). At Key Stage 2 the talking stick could be a shell or other object of interest.
- Everybody listens when someone else is speaking
- Everybody has the chance to speak
- Always keep the circle shape
- Everyone has the right to pass
- Listen respectfully to what a person says
- Children may disagree with a statement but no one should be put down
- No statement or answer is wrong
- Nobody should be mentioned by name (it is not a "kangaroo court")
- Children can only talk about their own issues, not someone else's.



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Initially the size of the circle may be a problem. However, after the start up phase many teachers split the class into two, using another adult to work as the chairperson. In some instances, a child with specific difficulties can be particularly supported in a small group. During the start up phase, children will often copy each other. Also, some will pass on regular basis. Strategies need to be thought through in order to deal with these issues. They should be on the basis of encouragement, rather than coercion. Where behaviour is inappropriate, disruptive or attention-seeking, the child can be directed to sit outside of the circle and given the instruction that he/she may rejoin the group when he/she feels able to behave appropriately.

The Role of the Teacher

One the main functions of circle time is to help children develop their skills and attitudes, and recognise and learn to manage their feelings. It is a key strategy in developing self esteem and moving children towards taking responsibility for their own actions. It is important that the teacher (or other adult) is a member of the circle. He/she will therefore need to sit at the same height as the pupils, whether seated on chairs or the carpet. When running a circle time session, the teacher acts as a facilitator, giving appropriate information about issues upon which the discussion can unfold. As the discussion develops, the teacher may wish to inject more information in order to move the discussion on in a guided way. It may be appropriate with older children who have more advanced skills, for the teacher to allow a child to take over the chairmanship of the circle.

Confidentiality

It is important that the group develop trust and there needs to be agreement that circle time discussion is confidential to the group. As a teacher, there are a very small number of issues which cannot be kept confidential (i.e. child protection issues). In these very few instances, you would need to stop the child from sharing the issue in Circle Time, and provide a more appropriate opportunity for a personal discussion. (Remember, you must not seek or pursue such information.)



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Planning for Circle Time

There are two types of Circle Time. One that you have planned and which contributes to a progression in childrens' personal and social development, and one that arises from issues of the moment. In the early stages of developing children's skills in Circle Time, most of the activity and discussion will probably need to be planned. However, you can use Circle Time to deal with class issues such as unkind behaviour on the playground. As pupils' confidence grow in Circle Time, they will also suggest further issues for discussion.



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Planned circle time

Some suggestions for rounds or as an open forum:

I sometimes feel jealous because

I work best when

I feel happy when

I feel angry when

A goal I would like to achieve is

How do I feel when I put others down?

How do my friends feel if I put them down?

When do I feel tempted to do something I know is wrong?

When do I feel at risk?

Sharing is good because

When do I feel lonely?

My best friend makes me feel

When do I feel safe?

When friends congratulate me I feel

I sometimes argue with my brother/sister because

If I do not get my own way I feel

Being kind to a friend or member of the family makes me feel

A special, person in my life is

I can find a way out of a difficult situation by



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When I am busy doing something I enjoy I feel

People who care about me make me feel

At weekends, I like to

General Scene Setters

1. I am good at ...
2. I need to ask for help when ...
3. Someone who helps me is ...
4. I like you because ...
5. My name is ...
6. I like eating ...
7. The colour I like is ...
8. The place I like is ...
9. In school I like it when ...
10. My favourite TV programme is ...
11. The number of my house is ...
12. The game I like playing is ...
13. I like ...
14. Adults help me when ...
15. My special person is ...
16. He/she is special because ...
17. I am special because ...
18. I feel special because ...
19. I look special because ...
20. My friend is special because ...
21. What is special about this class ...

General Health Rounds

1. I know I am well because ...
2. I need to ask for help when ...
3. I know I am well because I feel ...
4. When I am healthy I feel ...
5. The special person who helps me take medicines is ...
6. I should never take medicines on my own because ...
7. When I have been ill, and taken medicines, I feel ...
8. I feel safe when ...
9. I can keep healthy by ...
10. When I feel healthy, the game I like playing is ...



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Smoking

1. Breathing in clean air makes me feel ...
2. People that care for me are special because ...
3. I need a caring adult to help me at home because ...
4. I need a caring adult at school to help me because ...
5. I need a caring adult at school to help me in the playground because ..
6. I think people smoke because ...
7. I have learned today that ...
8. My favourite advertisement is because ...
9. In my life, keeping healthy is important to me because ...
10. Not smoking allows me to ...
11. I like the smell of fresh air because...
12. I don't like being in a smoky room because ...
13. When I grow up I would like my home to be ...

Alcohol

1. I think people drink alcohol because ...
2. My favourite drink is because ...
3. Deciding for myself makes me feel ...
4. I know the person in my picture is an alcoholic because ...
5. If I knew someone who was drinking too much I would say to them ...
6. What I enjoy doing most is ...
7. When I grow up, I want to ...
8. When I am under pressure to smoke or drink, I will remember ...

Risk Taking and Decision Making

1. I feel good when ...
2. I feel good when I am making my own decisions ...
3. When my best friend smiles at me I feel ...

Drugs

1. My best friend trusts me because ...
2. A good friend is someone who ...
3. When my best friend smiles at me I feel ...



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More advanced circle time strategies

- Get the children use a higher order of thinking by asking challenging questions
- Consider carefully the type of questions to be asked, certain ‘closed’ questions can imply a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, right or wrong answer. This is limiting, and makes your task as facilitator much more difficult.
- Open questions provide much more challenge and extend thinking. For example, an open question might be, ‘In what way are you sure?’ This type of question is much more challenging to answer and stretches the children’s thinking.
- Whilst some questions can be planned into a Circle Time session, often a teacher will find that the children’s comments and views trigger other questions, which will extend their thinking. These questions cannot necessarily be planned in advance. In order to generate such questions, the teacher will need to listen intently, observing non verbal communication, empathising with how the children are feeling, and use imagination to understand the children’s world. This is not easy to do,. The teacher will need to trust their ability to generate questions. Try not to be thinking up the next question, whilst the children are talking, as you will find that you are not really listening as fully as you need to. Listen to the language children use, and, in turn, use their words in your questions, for example ‘It was a scary dream.’ Use the question ‘why was it a scary dream?’
- More advanced questions need to be given in a context of trust enabling children to handle the insecurity of uncertainty.
- The setting of ground rules for Circle Time begins to establish trust. The use of fun rounds helps children to develop their Circle Time skills and learn that there are no wrong answers in Circle Time.
- Laughter and fun will help children enjoy what they are doing, and help enable them to gain confidence.
- As a teacher, you will be responding to the children in such a way that they know their opinions and views are valued.
- If children do not follow the rules for Circle Time, you should pick this up swiftly and remind them of the ground rules. They will also do the same.
- Your curiosity and interest in the children’s views will generate the same attitude from their peers.



Check list for circle time

The following check list will help you assess how Circle Time is developing in your school. It will help highlight the benefits, and where problems exist:

- Do all teachers use Circle Time?
- Who does not use Circle Time?
- Do midday supervisors use circle time?
- Is it used at all key stages?
- Is it used in a planned, progressive way?
- Is it used reactively?
- Do children enjoy it?
- What do they think they learn?
- Does Circle Time help them solve class problems?
- Does Circle Time help them feel listened to?
- Are there behaviour problems during Circle Time?
- If so, are they easily resolved?
- Does Circle Time support children with behaviour problems?
- Does Circle Time challenge the thinking of all pupils?
- Do parents know about Circle Time?



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Other supporting strategies

There are a number of other strategies that will contribute towards a whole school approach to behaviour management. In many respects they underpin the planned and reactive work covered in Circle Time.

Reward/sanction system

Revisit your reward and sanction system. Make sure it has a balance of rewards and sanctions, rather than being top heavy in one or the other. Develop rewards that are attainable by all, and developmental, this is important in that it gives children the opportunity to build on previous achievement.

Make sure the rewards you offer are accessible to all. The most challenging children need to achieve and be rewarded, this may be based on non-academic criteria. Other children will often understand why you are rewarding a challenging pupil. Indeed, they will suggest when these children need, or should be given an additional reward. If you have not looked at your reward and sanction system recently, then a review is worthwhile. Certainly, it should not remain stagnant.

Mid day supervisors

Do mid day supervisors interact with the children? Are they actively involved and, what strategies do they use? Why not teach them to adopt Circle Time as a forum for active games? Often mid day supervisors feel undervalued, and not part of the staff. In fact, where mid day supervisors are really effective, they play a major role in improving the whole school state of behaviour management. Consider putting together some INSET for them. This, on its own, will make supervisors feel more valued.

Do you include mid day supervisors occasionally in staff meetings? If not you should. Make sure you raise their profile, for example are they able to offer their own rewards, and report this back to the class teacher?

'Buddy' system

Some schools have adopted the buddy system, like the bus stop system, this is not new, but tremendously effective. Basically, older children, say Year Six, are a friend or 'buddy' to younger children, say Year Three children. They are able to help younger children with problems in and around school, at playtime, or at lunchtime. Even challenging children take on this responsibility well. It is empowering and they rise to the trust and responsibility. Some schools have extended the 'buddy' system by getting the older children to listen to the younger children reading. Clearly, parameters need to be set. It is, however, an excellent system, which works, well, empowering children, and contributing towards the whole school behaviour management model.



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Bus stop

Not a new idea, but very effective. Perhaps a child does not have anyone to play with, which can lead to unhappiness and in some cases behaviour problems. In this case all children and mid day supervisors know that if a child stands or sits in a certain place (some schools literally have a bus stop), then that child needs help in finding a play partner. If you do not use this strategy, consider adopting it, it works well. Why not give Buddies the responsibility of ‘policing’ the bus stop? They rise to this responsibility, and in this way make a contribution towards the whole school behaviour model.

Golden Time

Where children have succeeded to in completing work really well, or where there has been a marked improvement in behaviour, then the child is awarded Golden Time. This is a period of time at the end of the day or session when they can do something they want to do, for example using the computer drawing or playing a game.

Family/community room

Have you considered having a facility in school to allow parents to meet at specific times? For example, twice a week at 3 o’clock? Could parents meet in the hall, or in a room for a cup of tea and a chat? If s, how should this occasion be managed? Some schools have asked a willing governor to help. Research has shown that initially this system has a slow start, but builds up, and is inclusive. The parents of challenging children will eventually use the facility. Could this be extended into an occasional or regular community facility? Here is an opportunity to encourage parents to take more responsibility, and to become interested and involved with the school.

What do we need to do next to develop Circle Time?



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