

## **Circle Time**

The use of circle time in schools developed from quality circles which have been used in industry for many years. Jenny Mosley, who has done much to popularise its use says that it was used in industry, "to overcome the gulf that can develop between management and the shop floor... the reputation for quality which Japan enjoys can be attributed largely to the widespread use of the approach". Circle time also has roots in social group work and in solution focussed therapeutic approaches.

The method is now in widespread use in schools across the UK. In Scotland many primary schools use the method regularly and it is starting to be introduced into secondary schools. There is an increasing awareness of its benefits as part of a whole school policy aimed at creating a positive ethos and dealing more effectively with problems such as bullying. It can be used with young people of any age providing it is introduced carefully and with the backing of resources and techniques which are suited to the age and stage of the young people involved. The references at the end of this sheet provide a starting point for those interested in introducing circle time to their classrooms.

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## **Creating the Right Conditions**

Between 6 and 18 participants is the best number. Any more than that and it becomes difficult for everyone to take a full part in proceedings. An open circle of chairs or cushions is all the equipment that is needed. There should be no tables or desks which could act as a barrier - or a support for slumping heads! Care should be taken so that the circle is as perfect as possible, allowing each face to be seen by all other participants. Many schools also use a 'talking object' to facilitate discussion. The talking object can be anything - a teddy bear or other cuddly toy, a cushion or a decorated piece of wood or plastic can be used. This talking object is passed around the circle and the only person who is allowed to talk is the person holding the talking object.

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## **What does the Teacher do?**

The teacher is a part of the circle and sits on the same type of chair or cushion as everyone else. This helps to signal that what is happening is a special kind of classroom activity in which the teacher is a facilitator rather than a director. He or she has a special responsibility to ensure that the agreed rules are kept, that the emotions of individuals are protected and that suitable activities are prepared. The teacher must also be ready to draw a session to a close if pupils are persistently breaking the rules. This can happen, particularly with teenage circles, and it is important that the failure of one session does not lead to the method being abandoned. For some pupils this type of activity, in which they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own words and actions, is new and takes some getting used to.

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## **What are the Rules?**

The most important thing about the rules for circle time is that they should be discussed and agreed by all members. This is one of the first activities that should take place. Three basic rules which should be discussed are:

- Only one person should speak at once - the talking object helps this rule
- You can "pass" if you don't want to speak about something
- No put downs

The first of these helps to create order and to encourage people to listen to others. The second and third help to ensure the emotional safety of children taking part: nobody should be forced to speak about something which they find embarrassing and nobody should be ridiculed for saying something in which they genuinely believe - however much others may disagree with their views. The group may state these rules in other ways and may add extra ones.

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### ***Keep it Positive***

There is a possibility that this could be a negative activity - a moaning session in class time. The teacher should set the tone by taking every opportunity to make positive comments - "that was very interesting" or "thank you, that was really helpful". If, during an open discussion a negative comment is made (a common one is, "the school toilets stink") the teacher should encourage others to suggest solutions rather than just allowing them to echo the complaint. The emphasis is on problem solving - a solution focussed approach rather than going over and over the past.

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### ***Getting Started***

It is good to start each session with a game. This can help to relax everybody or to trigger discussion. For example, a game that can be used to develop trust involves the participants forming pairs. The first person holds his or her hand exactly 30 centimetres in front of the second person's face. The second person now has to try to keep that position while the first slowly moves his or her hand around. As people stretch out on tiptoe or descend to floor level in an attempt to maintain the required separation things can get noisy so insist on silence - anyone breaking the rule is "out". After a minute roles are reversed. This could precede a discussion about the nature of trust.

A Mexican wave can be used to promote co-operation or a guessing game could be used to help develop questioning skills.

To help develop listening skills pairs can again be used. Each one of the pair has to tell the other two or three interesting things about him or herself. Each pair then has to introduce each other repeating the interesting things. Shopping list games can also be used to help listening. Each person has to remember the items suggested by others in the circle.

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### ***The Discussion***

This can take various forms. The teacher should first remind the group about the agreed rules and then initiate a round of statements. Start off with non-controversial topics which will encourage participation. For example, "my favourite activity is..." or "being a friend means...". As the sessions continue the participants develop more confidence and will start to reveal more about themselves. The teacher should make sure that vulnerable participants are protected from put-downs. Starters such as, "the best day of my life was..." and "the worst day of my life..." can produce very revealing, and sometimes moving, contributions.

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## **Solving Problems**

Circle time can be used to help solve problems which have been identified by either the teacher or the pupils. Problems and issues can be identified by brainstorming or by rounds such as, "the best thing about this school is..." and "the worst thing about this school is...". Try to make sure that if a real problem is identified at least one positive suggestion is agreed before the session ends. (e.g. "Mrs. J will arrange for John and Sarah to have a meeting with the head teacher to discuss the toilets").

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## **What has this got to do with Tackling Bullying?**

Circle time has an important role to play in the prevention of bullying. It can help young people develop skills such as listening and empathising; it can promote respect for others and self-esteem; it is a forum within which the nature and effects of bullying can be considered; and it can be used to develop an anti-bullying code to which all members of the school community have contributed.

It can also be used to react to a particular problem. For example, if a particular group of youngsters is involved in bullying behaviour this could be openly discussed in the circle. Another example might be if a pupil is being socially excluded because of a perceived difference. A circle time discussion could be initiated which focused on an individual's right to be different. This could be done in such a way that it did not draw attention to the excluded individual but promoted reflection about the underlying causes of the isolation.

If it is only an isolated, spasmodic activity the value of circle time is greatly reduced. However, if its principles are incorporated into a whole school policy and practised by adults as well as pupils it can make a fundamental difference to the ethos of a school. It will not completely stop bullying but it will help to involve young people in the development of a school policy, bring more incidents into the open and encourage a more caring atmosphere. Youngsters will start to apply the "no put-downs" rule outside the circle and will remind their peers - and sometimes their teachers - when this rule is broken.

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### Resources and references

- Mosley, J. (1993) *Turn Your School Round* LDA: Wisbech, Cambridgeshire
- Mosley, J. and Tew, M. (1999) *Quality Circle Time in the Secondary School - A Handbook of Good Practice* David Fulton Publishers: London
- Lloyd, G. and Munn, P. (eds) (1998) *Sharing Good Practice: Prevention and Support for Pupils with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*. Moray House Publications: Edinburgh
- Sharp S & Smith PK (1994) *Tackling Bullying in Your School - A Practical Handbook for Teachers* Routledge: London

Titles produced by [Lucky Duck Publishing](#) at 34 Wellington Park, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 2UW are:

- Six Years of Circle Time - a Primary Curriculum (spiral bound activity file)
- Magic Circles - Building Self Esteem through Circle Time (a handbook)
- Picture This - Guided Imagery for Circle Time (audio tape and activity booklet)
- Circle Time Resources (copiable materials)
- Circle Time - An Activity Book for Teachers
- Developing Circle Time (book including worksheets)
- Coming Round to Circle Time (video)

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