



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

CHECK-IN CIRCLE FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

"I am because we are."

—African Proverb

OVERVIEW

Students or staff sit in a circle, center themselves with a Mindfulness Moment, and use a talking piece to respectfully take turns answering a question about how they are doing. They close the Circle process by reflecting on the effectiveness of the process itself.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Mondays to start the week or Fridays to close the week
- Regular check-in prior to staff meetings
- At the end of a month/quarter/semester

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 -30 minutes (depending on the size of the group)

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College
- Adult

MATERIALS

- Chairs arranged in a circle (or all participants sitting on the floor in a circle) with no furniture in the center
- Talking piece
- Bell or chime (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Increase social and self-awareness and verbalization of feelings
- Practice active listening
- Increase positive connection and a sense of caring community

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Before engaging in this practice, take a moment to choose and reflect on the question that will be asked during the Circle process (see list of questions under "Instructions"). Will students and/or staff have any difficulty or discomfort in answering this question? If so, what adjustments could you make?

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Convening a check-in circle on a regular basis creates a reliable and predictable space for students (and adults) to share important events that are going on in their lives that affect their learning. It allows other members of the community to learn what is going on in the lives of their fellow students and co-workers so that they may lend support or simply offer their compassionate understanding.

Ultimately, a regular check-in circle builds a sense of connection among those in the classroom or staff by sharing moods, feelings, and moments of joy and pain. It also increases self-awareness and awareness of others, while creating space to acknowledge and release tensions related to external pressures or situations.

Note: *Application of Circle to resolve conflict or engage in difficult conversations requires [training for facilitators](#).*

THE PRACTICE: "CHECK-IN" CIRCLE

Through the structure of the circle practice, create a space to encourage all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another on an equal basis and seek a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Consistency is important; establish the routine and be patient as participants learn to honor the rhythm of the talking piece and to trust others.

It is suggested that all Keepers practice answering the questions for themselves in preparation for the Circle.

The Circle presented here is simple and can be practiced with the easy-to-follow directions provided.

- Seat all participants in a circle (preferably without any tables).
- Choose one person (teacher, facilitator, or student) to act as Keeper of the Circle.
 - The Keeper welcomes everyone to the Circle, explains its purpose, plans and performs the opening and closing, poses questions, responds to each round as a participant, and passes the talking stick either to the left or the right.

PURPOSE

The Keeper of the Circle explains the purpose of the circle to participants:

- *The purpose of this Check-In Circle is to provide an opportunity for participants to share what is going on for them and to acknowledge what is on the mind and heart of others.*

WELCOME

The Keeper of the Circle welcomes everyone to the space of the Circle.

MINDFULNESS MOMENT

The Keeper of the Circle leads everyone in a mindfulness moment:

- *Close or lower your eyes, take a deep breath, and listen to the sound. Open or raise your eyes when the sound ceases.*

OPENING

The Keeper of the Circle begins with an opening (and ends with a closing later) to mark the Circle as a distinctive space for dialogue. The following quote can be used to open the Circle or the Keeper can choose one of their own:

- *"I am because we are." - African proverb*

ROUND

- Use a talking piece passed sequentially around the Circle, giving each person the choice to speak or pass when the talking piece comes to them. Honoring the talking piece means active listening to each person and respecting the right to pass.

- The right to pass reduces the fear and stress that may block higher brain functioning, making it more possible to participate constructively. The choice to say “no” encourages students to engage—provided the questions are real and meaningful and the opportunity to participate is always present.
- Remind students that they are invited to speak when the talking piece comes to them, to listen when they do not hold the talking piece, and are free to pass.
- The Keeper of the Circle poses one of the questions below for a round. The Keeper should always provide their own answer first and then pass the talking piece to their left or right:
 - *Tell us about a high and low point in your life in the past week (or last weekend, or last month, or summer, etc.).*
 - *Hold up your hand with fingers raised to reflect how you are feeling this morning (this afternoon, right now). 5 fingers raised = “Terrific/I am great/I am available to help out anyone today!” 1 finger raised = “I am struggling/I could use some help today!”*
 - *What are the roses and thorns in your life in the past week (or last weekend, or last month, or last year, or summer, etc.)?*
 - *If your inner world was a weather report, what would it be today?: Sunny, Rainy, Windy, Foggy, Stormy, Cold, Hot, Cloudy, Clear Skies, Thunder and Lightning, etc.*
 - *What do others need to know about how you are feeling today?*

CHECK-OUT ROUND

The Keeper of the Circle asks participants:

- *How did you like the Circle today?*

CLOSING

The Keeper of the Circle closes the Circle with the following quote (or may choose one of their own):

- *“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” - Helen Keller*

ADAPTATIONS

- Consider modifying the openings and closings with quotes or lyrics from songs that will inspire your particular students or staff; invite others to do the Keeping or do an opening or closing.
- Consider asking a student or pair of students to lead the Circle Check-In.
- Experiment with different kinds of check-in questions.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do you notice whether regular Check-In Circles are building trust, active listening, and/or support among staff and/or students? In what ways?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Restorative practices are proactive processes, such as the Circle process, used by educators to foster strong relationships and community among school staff and students in order to prevent conflict.

While the research on the effectiveness of restorative practices is limited, one [study](#) of Pittsburgh public schools looked at the impact of these practices in 22 schools versus 22 control schools. Outcomes in the implementation schools included improved school climate (according to teachers), and reduced suspensions, especially among African-American and low-income students. Overall, the disparity in suspensions between African-American and white students, and low- and higher-income students decreased as a result.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A [positive school climate](#) is built on a foundation of trust and care among students and staff members. Indeed, students who feel a [sense of safety and belonging](#) at school have greater academic success and well-being. They're more motivated to learn and less likely to engage in risky behavior.

Teachers and school staff [benefit](#) from a positive school climate as well. A supportive work environment lessens staff emotional exhaustion and feelings of low personal accomplishment. It also increases their commitment to the profession, lessening attrition rates, and bolsters their belief that they can make a difference in students' lives.

SOURCE

[Circle Forward](#) is a resource guide designed to help teachers, administrators, students, and parents incorporate the practice of Circles into the everyday life of the school community with comprehensive step-by-step instructions for how to plan, facilitate, and implement the Circle. It provides over one hundred specific lesson plans for the application of Circles in the many areas of school life.

[The Center for Restorative Justice](#) offers training and professional development in restorative justice practice for K-12 schools and universities. Also see the book [Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School](#).