

Talking Circles “101” Training Facilitator: Paula Schaefer

TALKING CIRCLES GUIDELINES

**** These guidelines and the brief training on the “basics of circles” are not intended to take the place of intensive Circle Keeper training, but rather to allow participants the opportunity to learn more about circle and the how to’s and what if’s in keeping a circle that facilitates a general conversation between youth and staff, and between youth and youth. By no means should a participant assume that this handout out and/or brief training on the basics of circle adequately prepares them to keep a serious conflict resolution circle, and/or a facilitate a victim/offender dialogue of any kind.***

PeaceKeeping 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 peacekeeping circles provide a way for people to have conversations and to work through conflict or differences in a safe and productive way. The circle process is a way of getting the most complete picture of whatever issue is at hand to enable participants to move together in a good way and to build and maintain a healthy community. Through circle process we share our stories, learn about ourselves, each other and gain a better understanding of what it’s like to “be in another person’s shoes”. 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 & criminal justice systems.

Circles can be used for learning and practicing communications skills, negotiating, community building, conflict resolution, talking about specific issues, staff and youth team building, staff meetings, to develop community standards for how people work and live together, and problem solving.

In a juvenile facility this process can be used to bring staff and youth together for prevention and early intervention on any issues that come up within the Housing Unit Community, in School, and within staff teams.

Other possible uses for talking circles: brainstorming, problem-solving, conflict resolution, debrief community incidents/issues, staff meetings, program community check-in’s and to strengthen housing unit and classroom communities.

Circle can be used daily as check-ins to begin and end the day; during transition times, i.e. to go from school to group living. Once a week Community Circles to discuss how well community

members are working together to create and maintain a safe community, to provide mutual support, and to successfully work together to achieve common goals. Anytime there is conflict or the potential for conflict.

Circle process promotes better listening and gives participants an opportunity to really consider the opinions and ideas of others. It reinforces the principle of equality and empowerment for all and it increases group cohesiveness and community building.

Formal circle process:

Circles are facilitated by people who have been trained to “keep” circles. The role of the circle keeper is to identify the issues that bring people together for a particular circle, to create a safe place within the circle by reminding participants of the shared values of the community and the purpose of coming together in circle. The circle keeper begins and ends the circle with a ritual – a reading, invocation, poem or prayer. The keeper poses discussion topics, questions & issues, acknowledges comments, summarizes discussion, highlights concerns or points raised, and re-focuses discussion if need be.

Role of Keeper

- Trained facilitator
- Does opening sequence – opening ritual, tells how much time for circle, helps make circle a safe place by reminding participants of values, purpose & guidelines
- Poses discussion topics, questions & issues
- Acknowledges comments, summarizes, highlights concerns or points raised, refocuses discussion
- Facilitates the closing sequence/ritual (i.e., reading of a quote, poem, or a song)

Talking Piece:

The keeper explains the use of the talking piece:

A talking piece, generally an object which has particular meaning to the community, is used to pass from one person to the next (clockwise starting from the keeper), to facilitate and share speaking time in the circle. One cannot speak unless holding the talking piece, except with permission of the Circle Keeper. When the talking piece comes to a person s/he can pass it without speaking if they choose to. They can do so without others making assumptions or judgments about why they chose to pass. The talking piece gets passed around and around until everyone has had their say. Once the talking piece goes around the circle and comes back to the Keeper, the Keeper may: summarize what people have been saying and raise potential questions to address before passing the talking piece around again; summarize what people have been saying and hold the talking piece to open up the circle for anyone to speak; hold the talking piece

and call on specific people to clarify certain issues; or pass the talking piece to someone else to facilitate an open circle discussion on a key issue.

The advantages of using a talking piece include:

- greater opportunity for listening and reflection: since a person has to wait for the talking piece to come around before speaking there is more focus on what people are saying than on preparing an immediate response.
- prevention of one-on-one debates or arguments since people cannot respond out of turn.
- shared responsibility -- for the discussion and for the peacemaking -- among all the circle members.
- use of a talking piece reinforces the principle of equality in the circle: equal opportunity for all to participate and equal capacity of all to contribute.
- allows the more verbal people in the group to sit back and to listen more carefully than they would normally and does not allow them to “take over” discussions
- more opportunity for quiet people to speak and to be heard in the discussion; the talking piece gives them time to speak without having to compete with the more verbal people.
- promotion of consensus: all people are heard from and all issues are aired before any decision is made by the circle.

Creating Safety in Circle:

At the start of the circle the keeper elicits the participants help in creating and maintaining a safe circle. One way to do this is to share with participants that from a:

Circle Perspective:

1. *Circles build on the belief that every human being wants to be connected to others in a good way ...*
2. *The second belief is that everybody shares core values that indicate what connecting in a good way means ... (Pranis, Stuart, Wedge 2002)*

Prior to the start of circle the keeper can set an index card on each chair in the circle or give one to each participant when they are seated and then pass out markers. The keeper will ask each of the participants to think about a personal core value that they would like to see be a part of the circle in order for the space to feel safe. The keeper then asks participants to write their personal core value on the index card. Then the keeper tells the participants that the talking piece will be passed to the left and each person will have a chance to say their value out loud – this doesn't require they give an explanation for their value as each of these are generally self-explanatory – once a participant shares their value they then place it right side up in the circle. Once the piece has come back to the keeper she or he can ask if any one has an additional value not already represented in the circle

that they would like to add. Once additional values are added then the keeper thanks the participants for sharing their values and tells them that the values in the circle have already helped create a safe place and then ask if each of the participants will commit to the values in the circle as the ways in which all will interact with one another during the circle. The keeper will start by saying “I commit to these values” and then passes the piece to the left and asks for commitment from each participant – they can say “I commit”, “I agree”, “OK” or something similar.

The circle keeper also guides participants to honor the circle and those in it by:

[the following can be written on a poster board or easel sheet and posted on the wall near circle]

Honoring the Circle:

We honor the circle by:

- Speaking from the heart, honestly and openly
- Speaking with respect for self & others
- Speaking to the question/topic posed in the circle
- Speaking briefly enough so that everyone will have time to speak
- Listening fully with a willingness to learn & grow
- Being open to the wisdom in each person
- Speaking from your own experience, thoughts and feelings – using “I” statements

The value activity not only sets the “stage” for a safe space but can also be used as a touch stone if anyone in the circle misbehaves in some way not in keeping with the values. For instance, if someone calls someone a name in the circle the keeper would stop the process and ask if we are keeping our commitment to the values in the circle. This can be a reminder for all and generally takes care of misbehavior.

What circle process can do: increase competency development, relationship building, provide a sense of belonging, promotes mutual responsibility, creates and maintains a safe environment, empowers girls and staff, and give everyone a voice.

Benefits of Using Talking Circle Process

- Spreads responsibility to all participants
- Creates safe space to talk about issues
- Promotes empathy
- Creates a sense of belonging for all members of the community
- Increases group cohesiveness and community
- Allows for self-reflection

Tips for Handling Problem Behaviors:

- Listen for what the person needs (to be heard, to feel like a valued member of the group, to not feel they are “on the hot seat”, etc.)
- Involve participant in the process, (e.g., have them pick the talking piece, reading, have them do the opening reading)
- Affirm person as a valuable circle member while reminding them their commitment to the values, about the topic currently posed in circle and about the purpose of this circle
- Do prevention by getting people trained in circles and by using opening ritual each time to reinforce circle values
- Trust the circle to take care of it

Resource Books:

- **Peacemaking Circles & Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home** by Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Ph.D. To order: www.livingjusticepress.org
- **Justice As Healing: Indigenous Ways** August, 2005. A collection of writings on community peacemaking and restorative justice from the Native Law Centre at the University of Saskatchewan Wanda D. McCaslin, Editor **to order:** Ph 651-695-1008 or **email:** info@livingjusticepress.org
- **Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community** by Pranis, Stuart & Wedge by **Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge to order:** Ph 651-695-1008 or **email:** info@livingjusticepress.org
- **Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future** by Larry Brentro, Martin Brokenleg,
And Steve Van Bocken 2002
- **Women Circling the Earth: A guide to Fostering Community, Healing and Empowerment** by Beverly Engel
- **Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture** by Christina Baldwin
- ❖ **Little Book of Justice & Peacebuilding Series** www.GoodBks.com
 - **The Little Book of Restorative Justice**
 - **The Little Book of Conflict Transformation**
 - **The Little Book of Family Group Conferencing**
 - **The Little Book of Circle Processes**
 - **The Little Book of Strategic Negotiations**

Sources: Minnesota Department of Corrections Restorative Justice Initiative - 9/98. Excerpted in part, with permission, from **Building Community Justice Partnerships: Community Peacemaking Circles,** by Barry Stuart (1997: Aboriginal Justice Learning Network, Department of Justice, Canada.) Compiled by Paula Schaefer, updated Feb. 2007 Paula@PSchaefer.com