

Appendix 2

Circle Time for the Early Years - Jenny Mosley

Circle Time is appropriate for older children in the EYFS, not babies and toddlers. Jenny Mosley's Quality Circle Time model is a whole-school approach to setting up and maintaining a positive school management system to promote positive behaviour and create a caring and respectful school ethos: www.circle-time.co.uk/site/home

Since the beginning of time, young children and adults have gathered together in circles to learn about themselves and others through a rich weave of rhymes, songs and games. Settling into a circle should come naturally. We know, however, that many families are either under enormous stress or just time-impoverished and that many of the usual nurturing rituals to help children grow emotionally, socially and linguistically are just disappearing. This short paper will outline how, with planning and preparation, you can tap into the potential of Circle Time as a highly effective approach to deliver the SEAD philosophy and curriculum.

A properly structured Circle Time programme offers Early Years settings a comprehensive, practical and focused format that supports young children's social and emotional development in the following ways.

- Circle meetings provide pleasurable experiences that give children a positive attitude to learning.
- Children come together to share their learning and play.
- Children learn to share adult time and attention, equipment, and space.
- Children learn to develop an identity within the group.
- Children see for themselves that it is beneficial to be self-controlled and friendly towards others.
- The supportive environment means that children feel emotionally safe enough to take more risks, thereby becoming more confident and independent.
- Children learn positive ways to form and maintain relationships with each other.
- Children learn appropriate ways to express their emotions and how to 'read' emotions in others.
- Children learn to look, listen, think, and to develop problem-solving skills.

The Circle Time process is democratic and provides opportunities for all children to feel valued.

From a practitioner's point of view, Circle Time provides:

- a structure that offers security and continuity and allows children to move seamlessly from simple to more complex activities
- a structure that ensures that you tap into games, songs and activities and use them in productive and intentional ways
- a regular opportunity to observe and assess children's progress and make plans to move them forward
- an insight into how each child learns and a means of identifying any gaps in their learning.

Each Circle Time session includes different activities that have been carefully chosen to ensure that children's attention is focused on a single learning objective. This is very important because it means that everything they do has a useful purpose as well as being enjoyable and 'fun'. In other words, it is not a time to play games for their own sake or a way of filling in a bit of spare time. It is not just a chat time dominated by the adults. It is a high-quality, timetabled and planned way to help children learn important, life-affirming lessons.

Preparing for Circle Time

You need to select a suitable place in which to hold Circle Time sessions. This should be carpeted and large enough to seat the children in a comfortable circle with sufficient space to carry out the activities. Initially, it may be difficult for very young children to sit in a circle and concentrate on the activities. Marking a symbolic place for them with their own cushions, carpet squares, or even golden paper doilies, will help. Also, make sure that you hold your circle in an area that is free from distractions by ensuring that toys and books are out of sight and out of reach. Put a 'Do Not Disturb – We Are Enjoying Circle Time' sign on your door.

Circle Time should be visually timetabled. Very young children need to join in short circle sessions for about ten minutes every day. As they move through your setting, you will be working towards less frequent sessions – that last for about 15–30 minutes and are held at least once a week. At the point when Circle Time is happening for at least 20 minutes weekly, it is a good idea to introduce the idea of sitting on the chairs. Chairs give you an opportunity to 'teach' body language: 'I like the way you are listening and looking at the same time.' You need to sit on the same-sized chair as the children – as this gives the signal that we are all equal; we are a team, and all our voices are equally valuable. Facilitating a Circle Time session takes energy so it is vital that you choose a time when both you and the children are feeling fresh and vibrant. Try and make sure you take a tiny break before you start – so you can let go of any irritations and are ready to be positive.

Getting started

Introducing Circle Time to very young children presents some special challenges due to their immaturity, short attention span and lack of experience in a focused learning environment. You also need to deal with a great variation between personalities, physical needs and social experience. Initially, your objective should be for all the children to have fun, make friends and gain confidence in some basic learning skills so that they all look forward to coming back for more.

Here are some good principles to follow.

- Play games that help children to learn, and stay away from any 'drills' that may make them tense and nervous.
- Keep things moving at a good pace so they are always interested.
- Minimise 'preaching' – young children have short attention spans and you often only have about ten seconds to make your point.
- Concentrate on improving selected individual skills – young children get confused if you try to cover too many things in one session.
- Introduce a shy puppet who needs their kind words or strokes.
- Always end the session with a 'calm-down' so that children leave the Circle Time session feeling positive and relaxed.
- Praise all the children's skills throughout the Circle Time session – no negative remarks: 'I like the way you are looking at me when you are speaking,' said to the child near the one whose attention is wandering everywhere works wonders!

What happens in Circle Time sessions?

The Five Learning Skills

To begin with, you need to use activities, games, rhymes and songs that teach the Five Learning Skills. This is important because these skills underpin everything you are planning to do with your children in the future.

The Five Learning Skills of Circle Time are looking, listening, speaking, thinking and concentrating. The following short routine can be practised as a fun daily game. Once you have explained the skills, you can say the words while they perform the actions, or vice versa. You can then make them into a game by playing Simon Says, concentrating on the five skills.

In Circle Time...

We use our looking skills (point to eyes)

We use our listening skills (point to ears)

We use our speaking skills (point to mouth)

We use our thinking skills (put hands on side of head)

We use our concentration skills (clasp hands and place in laps)

Once these skills have been learnt they can then be incorporated into Circle Time sessions. We call these the Five Steps of Circle Time. Initially you only select two or three steps – to keep it simple – for example:

- 'meet-up' games and activities to introduce the skill that you wish to work on
- turn-taking rounds, rhymes or games that reinforce children's experience of the chosen skill
- calm-down activities to ensure that everyone leaves the meeting feeling positive and ready to try out new skills.

The activities you choose will depend on the maturity of the children in the group. For instance, very young children will enjoy simple, one-word 'rounds' while older children are capable of speaking whole sentences if you give them a suitable starter sentence-stem. Some children aren't ready to speak out at all so can each take a turn in just picking up their chosen picture card to show to the circle something they like listening to. Or they could whisper their word to a puppet who speaks for them.

Once your children are familiar with the Five Learning Skills, you can begin to introduce games, songs and activities that help them to explore the moral values that help us get on together. We call these:

The Golden Rules

We are gentle – we don't hurt others

We are kind and helpful – we don't hurt anybody's feelings

We listen – we don't interrupt

We look after property – we don't damage things

We work – we don't waste time

We play safely – we don't spoil others' games

We are honest – we don't cover up the truth

People often ask, 'But why do you include the negatives?' We believe children learn by opposites. Most adults have never explicitly learnt the Golden Rules – they use a language of 'Don't'. This way we give everyone the same language by encouraging them to praise the opposite. 'I really like the way you were gentle when you gave Jo that heavy toy.' (Parents love to have copies of the Golden Rules.) The best way to display them, in the inside and outside of settings, is with photos of children keeping the Rules.

Once you have taught the Five Skills, the children are then ready to learn the Golden Rules. These can be introduced one at a time through planned circle sessions. Eventually, when the children are ready, Circle Time sessions would follow the full Five Steps.

Five Steps of Quality Circle Time

Step One: Meeting Up – You choose a game to help everyone 'meet up'. By beginning with a specially selected game, and not with 'talking', you establish that learning is fun – and being with each other is even more fun.

Step Two: Warming up – Children need to 'warm up' to speaking. Some are shy, some like to dominate. By using a small talking object, during 'the round', every child has a turn and knows not to interrupt the one who is speaking. You can 'coach' shy children in small groups before Circle Time by using a puppet. The puppet tells them what is going to happen and asks them what they would like to say. They whisper into his or her ear, then the puppet speaks for them during the round. The round could be a whole sentence based on a given sentence stem, or a word, or a turn-taking song or rhyme.

Step Three: Opening up – We help children develop empathy, by exploring situations and issues that are important to them. The Golden Rules can also be 'opened up' during this step. Young children don't respond well to boring adult talk, so you need to use a range of metaphorical approaches to keep their interest. For example:

- Puppets: The puppets can have the same problems as the children, for example not wanting to leave Mum in the morning, feeling shy, unable to share. Through the use of clever interactive scripts children can explore their feelings. Puppets also have a lot of joys they want the children to share in.
- Stories: These are a powerful way of engaging children's hearts and minds. This is particularly true of role-play if the adult helper takes a turn in playing. The circle is like a 'theatre-in-the-round'. The space in the middle is magical – where any 'story' can be acted and reflected upon.

Step Four: Cheering up – Often the previous 'opening-up' step is intense – involving children in imagining, mime and empathising. If you were to suddenly stop the circle and say 'Well done – all out to play', it would be too abrupt. Step Four helps to get children 'centred' again and sufficiently resilient to face the 'hurly-burly' of play.

The 'cheering-up' step moves children back to the laughter of shared learning again. In the middle of the circle self-chosen children can teach new games to their peers. We can, through mime, learn to skip with their accompanying rhymes. We can sing new songs. We praise each other for the particular skills or values we focus on in Step Three. It's a time for celebration!

Step Five: Calming down – We now need to bridge the children calmly to go to their next activity. Here you can play a calming game like passing the tambourine around without any sound. You can play some of nature's sounds on a CD and they have to listen and guess. You can teach some simple breathing techniques or even, eventually, engage them in gentle, simple visualisations like sitting in a lovely safe green park, feeling a little breeze and watching the little rabbits nibbling under the hedges, feeling very happy and peaceful.

'Pick 'n' Mix' the Five Steps

You are the professional. You can choose different steps according to the emotional and social needs of your children and size of your circle. You might do a Step One – Step Four – Step Five. Any variation. BUT you never end on a Step Three. Step Three opens hearts and minds – so it always needs another step after it to distance the child from his/her earlier involvement and to get them ready to rejoin the 'outside' world. Any of the other four steps will help them with this task. You can even use Step Two with a round of: 'When I go outside, I want to...'

Golden Rules for adults

- Physically get ready for Circle Time by preparing a structured session plan and all its resources. Base the plan on the needs of the children.
- If you have a large group, break them up into smaller circles of eight to ten and make sure each adult helper follows the same session plan.
- Emotionally get yourself ready for Circle Time. Make sure you are in a good mood! Take a quick break before you start. Put a really happy, fun face on – or delay Circle Time until you can!
- Be led by the children's needs, feelings and thoughts.
- Don't speak too much.
- Join in and take turns, but don't dominate.
- Keep a brisk pace – don't get engaged in listening for just a few of the vocal children. If you keep to the Five Steps, everyone will be heard – but don't be afraid to go with the flow either!
- No 'put downs' in the circle – always praise the child who is doing the opposite behaviour to the child whose behaviour is worrying you. Children are fascinated by other children, so if you draw their attention to the positive behaviour they learn without being embarrassed or 'shamed'.
- Consider asking parents or grandparents into the circle. Many parents need to learn all the rhymes, songs and games too. It makes it so much more fun when you have an inter-generational circle. It gives the message that everyone loves learning and that we can all be respectful towards each other.
- Circle Time is designed to be both very structured and adaptable at the same time. Don't be afraid to try things out and learn from experience.

What makes Circle Time special is that it is able to focus everyone's attention on the personal, social and emotional aspects of many areas of the curriculum and helps children to approach each new challenge with calm assurance and self-belief.

Circle Time puts personal, social and emotional development where it belongs – at the very heart of everything you do with the young children in your care.

