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Recommendations for School Circles in a Time of Global Pandemic

Joe Provisor, Circle Ways

A pandemic virus that spreads through human contact or proximity brings with it a challenging paradox: at a time when we fear human contact, we most need human connection.

A recent news report from Italy, where nearly the whole population is under quarantine, said “consider a phone call as good as a hug.” With virtual circles, we can stay safe and still connect with others in a meaningful way.

Circle Ways has been conducting virtual circles online with participants around the world for many years. Here in Los Angeles, sometimes just travelling across town is an obstacle to circling up. As many schools move to online teaching during this time, we want to remind you that you do not have to give up circle practice – for social-emotional and academic learning – just because students are not able to come to school.

The image below is from a recent virtual online circle conducted via the Zoom platform. The “children’s fire” at the center is a reference to indigenous wisdom that reminds us to make all our decisions with an awareness of their effect on the children...for seven generations. “Keep the children always at the center of your circles,” we say to the adults.



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The process for conducting a virtual online circle is quite simple. We send a diagram showing the names of all participants (and in this case, their locations) arranged in a circle. As usual, we have a way to open the circle (ringing a bell, clapping hands, lighting candles, making dedications, etc.). After opening, anyone can begin by checking in, telling a story, or speaking to a pre-determined topic. The virtual "talking piece" proceeds clockwise from person to person based on the order of names in the diagram. At the end of each participant's sharing, s/he/they says, "I pass the talking piece to _____" (naming next person in the diagram). Participants can also "pass" by saying so.

After a round using the *basic form* (the talking piece going around the entire circle), the *web form* can be used for additional shares by having any person say, "I'm picking up the talking piece," and then returning it to the virtual "center" so another person can pick it up. After the sharing is complete, *witnessing* (each participant saying what stayed with them from what someone else said), *harvesting the wisdom of the circle* (reflecting on what can be gleaned from what everyone has said), and *check-out* (saying what you're taking with you from the circle) can be conducted by returning to the *basic form*.

Circles focused on COVID-19

The following recommendations can be adapted for online or classroom circles and can even be useful with large groups in an auditorium or in a crowded classroom where you can't move the chairs into an actual circle. If you have any questions, [please contact us](#).

Grades TK-2

For our youngest students, we always follow their lead. If we are hearing them talk about the virus or people getting sick, then we recommend circles that focus on the reality that *everyone gets sick from time to time and that we have the amazing capacity to recover and heal!* If the students are at home, parents can also participate (not by giving advice but by telling an *age- and context-appropriate, facilitating story*.)

Begin by noting that you hear them talking about the virus and that some people might be afraid of getting it. Then, ask how many of them have ever been sick and had to stay home from school or stay in bed. Every hand should go up.

The prompt for the circle is something like: *Tell about a time you got sick or got hurt. It could be just a time you had a cold or maybe you had to go to the doctor or the hospital. It could also be a time you fell down and needed a band-aid or some other help.*

The telling of these stories (even if at this age they are fantasies) has a salutary effect. This is because if we are able to tell such stories, that means we have healed and because if we hear similar stories from others we know we are not alone. We sometimes call these "boo-boo stories," and they build resilience in our little ones. A second round can use the prompt: *How did you get better?*

Since some of the fear associated with these things comes from a sense of having no control over them, it is also important to have students tap into *their own wisdom* about how to stay healthy and prevent disease. Although this does not replace giving

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them useful information about washing hands, not touching their faces, and keeping distance from others who are sick, it does activate an “internal locus of control” necessary for all behavior change. Advice giving is not the place we start. First, we build a foundation upon which the advice can be received. To build that foundation in the circle, you can ask simply: *What are some things you know you can do to stay healthy?* After a round of sharing responses to this, you can *witness* what you heard that you know to be helpful and *add* anything that might be missing.

It is important not to compound the fears expressed by the children, but it is equally important to give them an opportunity to express them. Finally, close with an *intention-setting* round where students say *one thing* they will do, one manageable, short-term objective, to stay healthy. The prompt for this round is something like: *What is one thing you can promise to do today to keep yourself and others around you healthy.* You can close with a group cheer like “Go for it!”

Grades 3-5

By the time students are 8-10 years old, they are certainly aware of information coming from the news and social media. This will likely get into the mix of what they are sharing. With students this age and older, it is good to ask about the information that has come to them: *What have you heard about the coronavirus and where did you hear it?* Just as we adults are experiencing, there is likely to be misinformation in what the children have heard. Importantly, as circle facilitators, it is not our place to correct them *as they are sharing*. Rather, when it is your turn to share, you can reflect on what you have heard, including what you think might be inaccurate information; but do this in a way that does not demean students for having taken in the misinformation.

With students this age, *accountability* for their intention-setting comes into play. After a round of intention-setting, call for a round where students share one thing they heard another student say that might be something they also would be able to do. Sharing these things in a context of deep listening raises consciousness, making it easier for students to recall and act on their intentions.

A useful acronym for intention-setting around healthy lifestyle choices is SMART. Commitments should be *specific, measureable, achievable, relevant, and time-limited*.

If you can, make a list of all the students' stated intentions and distribute the list to all. When the circle meets again, offer a check-in round on what happened as they tried to keep the intentions they set from last week. Again, there is no shame in not fulfilling an intention. It is an opportunity to look at the challenges and to re-set a viable intention. (To see a formal study on the effect of circles on adherence to healthy lifestyle choices with youth, [see this link](#) to the results of our three-year project in collaboration with the USC Keck Medical School.)

Also, at this age you can begin to offer reliable secondary sources of information from articles, books, and stories. Once again, this is offered *after* the primary sources of information from students' own experiences have been shared in the circle. [Here is a website](#) that offers a list of books for children about illness and recovery, including the classic *Madeline*.

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When you use a story, myth, fairy tale, or poem that has a healing motif, you can conduct a circle using this protocol:

1. Read the story or poem aloud one or two times.
2. Ask students to listen only for what interests them, what catches their attention. It might only be a word, phrase, or image. (They are not trying to figure out what the story “means.”) Keeping the instruction as simple as this, lowers what educators call the “affective filter” and avoids creating a cognitive load that would require the students to “perform” by interpreting the piece.
3. After opening the circle, do a round with students only saying the word, phrase, image, character, or moment that caught their interest. This is a “*speed round*.”
4. Then, for a “*story round*,” ask students to *tell about an experience in your life that is somehow related to the word or moment you chose*. For example, if a rainy day is mentioned in the story or poem, and that is what caught their attention, they can tell about a memory of a rainy day. If a friend is mentioned, they can tell whatever story comes to mind about an experience they had with a friend.
5. Follow the story round with a *witness round*.
6. Read the piece again. This time, the students will listen not only for their own connections to the piece but also to the connections their fellow students found. (You do not have to give this instruction, it simply happens.) In this way, the piece truly comes alive for them!
7. *Harvest the wisdom of the circle* by asking: *What can you say now about this story having heard all of the connections shared by your classmates*.
8. Close the circle.

Grades 6-12

All of the above is useful with older students. Even as adults, we like to tell our “boo-boo stories” of hurt and healing. At these ages, students are likely to be even more connected to information from social media and the internet. So, in a round where they share what they know, ask them to *identify the sources* of their information.

It is critical to include a round that invites students to share how they feel and what they think about this information. The intention-setting process described above is very useful for any age. The USC-Circle Ways study mentioned above was conducted with high-school age adolescents at risk for obesity-related diseases.

Mythology, fairy tales, and poetry are no less powerful and useful for older students (or even adults) because they convey universal patterns (archetypes) of healing and resilience, and so connect us with a reservoir of human experience that has endured for ages. Some examples are [The myth of Asclepius](#), the mortal and immortal healer, or [The Book of Job](#). (I like the Job version from this link because it breaks up the passages and so allows for a moment of reflection on each image.) Here is [an excellent source](#) for the full texts of fairy and folk tales on the topic of illness and cures.

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There are of course many poems that speak to illness, healing, and resilience. One might say that any poem, no matter how dark, is a testament to human resilience. If a poet or artist takes up the pen or brush to capture profound loss, fear, or desolation, the act of doing so is itself a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

As discussed above with younger students, after constructing a foundation of relevance based on the sharing of personal experiences, secondary informational sources (historical and current) can be offered; and subsequent circles can evolve from consideration of those sources as well.

[Information about historical epidemics](#) provides context for the current situation. Students can also be directed to current informational sources, such as the [CDC website](#). After students access such information, you can use the same protocols as with the story and poetry circles mentioned above. Ask the students: *What struck you or stayed with you about the information you read about the history of epidemics (or about the current pandemic)?* And carry on from there with their personal associations, thoughts, and feelings. When using these informational sources for circles, remember that the point is not to test for information retention, but rather to explore how the information touches us directly.

Thank you, educators for all you do. Nothing is more important at this time than caring for the children and for each other. In that spirit, here is a poem from Rumi that has endured for 700 years and still provides nourishment in these times.

The Guest House
Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.