

Why Circle Time?

Maybe as educators we should pay closer attention to the effectiveness of socially mediated learning, that is, children being part of and helping each others' learning. It seems sensible that teaching social and emotional skills through social and emotional processes would be set to succeed. These skills couldn't possibly be effectively learned without the chance to use them with other people, it would be like learning all the skills of driving but never getting into a car! The work of Vygotsky (1962) could be seen to support this view. In a nutshell, this eminent theorist supports the idea that children learn more effectively when learning experience allows them to interact directly with the environment, in this case the social environment. This means that a new skill will be most effectively learned if:

- learning takes place with other people supporting or 'scaffolding' the learning
- it is being learned in the manner closest to how the skill will be applied in reality
- the learner is given the chance of 'doing it', trying out the skill, rather than just hearing it or seeing it.

Circle Time is an effective method of socially mediated learning. Children learn well from one another, particularly when the social and emotional context feels safe and accepting. Indeed, Circle Time enhances the sense that children have of 'belonging' to the class group through sharing information about each other, getting to know one another better, playing games and having fun. Jenny Mosley, who has written a great many resources for Circle Time, sees it as an effective tool for schools in improving children's performance and cooperation, as well as a means to improve children's self-esteem (Mosley 1993, 1998).

Lown's research (2002a) found that both children and teachers view Circle Time as a positive intervention. It was seen as an effective method of improving feelings about self, building relationships with others and enhancing communication skills.

White (2009) holds the view that Circle Time is in the main a tool for improving self-esteem, but adds that in so doing, it also carries the potential to improve children's learning. White also sees Circle Time as a method of cultivating group identity and cohesion. Housego and Burns (1994) agree with the idea that Circle Time can and should enhance learning through allowing children to experiment with new ideas and viewpoints about emotional, moral, spiritual, cognitive or social concerns. Another frequently stated view is that Circle Time is a method of improving social skills, extending social networks and introducing children to the pleasures, pressures and demands of functioning in class-sized groups.

Most importantly, Circle Time uniquely allows every member of the class to be part of a network of accepting relationships between peers and adults. Once introduced to the particular way of interacting within Circle Time, it will come to be recognised by all participants as a positive time, a time when everyone looks after each other socially, emotionally and physically. These elements are built into the Circle Time Agreements, which open every session. Unkindness, criticism and put-downs are not tolerated. It won't take long for the children to form the habit of being positive with each other in Circle Time. Knowing that Circle Time is a positive time creates the climate for effective learning and allows children to feel more secure and comfortable in sharing feelings with each other. Having said that, this book is not meant to offer therapy of any sort, that is outside the purpose of the material. It is intended to develop social and emotional skills, as described earlier.

The Content of this Book

Although the materials follow a logical progression, and therefore will offer the most benefit if delivered in the order specified within the book, it is understandable that some adults may wish to 'dip' in to some sessions outside of that pattern. Most of the time, the focus of the sessions falls into half term blocks, that is, groups of five sessions under the same heading. Therefore blocks of five sessions together would provide a sensible way of sectioning up the material, depending on the coverage of other classes in the school (to avoid repetition for the children when they enter another class). Dipping into the sessions in this way is perfectly feasible for Years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6.

Year 5 sessions, however, would not easily break into sections in this way. The Year 5 sessions have been carefully designed as a progression of ideas and skills. This progression means that session content would be much less effective if delivered out of sequence and some children may not be able to benefit from the coverage of the later sessions in Year 5 if they have not experienced the earlier ones. Also, developmentally, some children may not be 'ready' for the content of Year 5 if delivered within an earlier year. The reason for this is that a certain level of maturity is required for children to be able to have the skills of insight and reflection necessary for these sessions; this point is reached for most children by the beginning of Year 5, but is less likely before. Please see the introduction at the beginning of the Year 5 sessions for a more detailed discussion about this.

Within Year 6, we have taken the opportunity to focus increasingly on the issue of transition, as this is inevitably uppermost in the minds of the children as they go through the year. It is hoped that the learning intentions of the sessions, particularly in the third term, will enable children to feel better prepared for their impending transition to secondary education.

We have added a 'floating' topic, covering aspects of anti-bullying and this can be delivered at any time though will need to be adapted to the age of the children who are going to receive it. It was decided to lodge this topic outside the rest of the Circle Time curriculum because schools will often focus on anti-bullying for a particular period of time, for example, some schools may organise an 'anti-bullying week' in which the whole school takes part, and therefore it would be potentially misleading and confusing to include the sessions within a particular term for a particular year group.

Organisation of the Circle Time Curriculum

It is intended that these materials provide ten sessions per term. This equates to just less than one session per week. Including ten sessions per term, even though terms are of varied length, is intended to allow for the fact that some weeks may not be available for Circle Time.

The sessions have been planned to take between 45 and 60 minutes, though, of course, this may vary. As teachers and teaching assistants become increasingly familiar with the Circle Time format and materials, they will become able to judge how to extend and reduce activities in order to ensure that the coverage fits within the allotted time.

Format of the Sessions

Most of The Circle Time sessions in years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 follow the same format. The Year 5 ones do too, but with some exceptions. The format is usually as follows, though the order can sometimes change slightly between sessions:

- Learning Intentions.
- Circle Time Agreements.
- Introductions.
- Mixer.
- Silent Statements.
- Sentence Completion.
- Pair Discussion.
- Active Game.
- Self-Esteem Builder.
- Closure Activity.

Sessions start with the Learning Intentions. We hope these will be shared with the children and have therefore written them, where possible, in 'child-friendly' language to enable the children to quickly engage with the focus of the session to come. The children should be reminded of the Circle Time Agreements every Circle Time session, even when they have become familiar with them.

Introductions are intended to bring the children together, to 'attune' them to working together as a cohesive group and the activity denotes the starting point of the session. Introducing oneself is affirming for each individual and is an important part of the session. It means all children having their presence recognised through a feeling of, 'Look, I am here!' For quieter children it gives them the floor briefly, in a non-threatening way. Some introductions require one person to introduce another; being introduced by someone else saying your name can give feelings of recognition and affirmation.

'Mixers' address the fact that many children will, at least initially, choose to sit with their friends when Circle Time begins. The spirit of Circle Time means that children are encouraged to develop and practice their social and emotional skills, and to maximise these benefits. We want them to interact with children that they know less well than their friends. By extending the number of children that they are experienced in working with and talking to in the class, the cohesiveness of the class group will be enhanced. Using the Mixing Game or Silent Statements early in the session means that the children will

be more likely to be sitting next to someone less familiar than their friends, in readiness for pair work.

Silent Statements do not require children to speak, so moving across the circle is a chance to give an opinion without having to verbalise one. This can be much easier for children who are a little shy, or reluctant to express an opinion in the face of an audience. In addition, Silent Statements often act as an introduction to the focus of the topic for the session, for example, the statement, 'Someone has been kind to me today.' Silent Statements also potentially give a great deal of useful information to adults, for example, 'Stand up and change places if there are things about playtime that you would like to change.' If the majority of the class moves, then there is an indication that the topic needs to be explored further.

Sentence Completion enables children to focus on a response for themselves, while hearing others' views and practising speaking and listening skills. Hesitant children may be encouraged to have a go because they have a starter in the sentence and other children provide models to copy from, if they so wish. It can be affirming for children to hear that other children have similar ideas to them.

Pair Discussion is used regularly because it is an excellent way to give children the confidence to discuss issues in a pair, when they might not feel able to do so in a large group. Since they are given a focus of discussion, children are able to engage in a conversation with another child who they may not have spoken to before. The strategy of reporting back on one's partner is sometimes used because it encourages good listening and is affirming. As a bonus, skills of negotiation are practised when the children need to agree on who will say what to the whole class. Pair Discussions are a good time for children to discuss more serious issues, for example, falling out with friends, without necessarily having to report back to the whole group. Conversation can be more personal, if they so wish, when the content of the conversation will not be shared beyond the pair.

Active Games are included in Circle Time since we recognise that for some children, sitting and talking for a while means that they start to lose focus and may become fidgety. Physical movement can serve to re-focus children for the next activity by providing a break. The active games that are included are often non-verbal, require skills of cooperation and negotiation and also provide sheer enjoyment!

The sessions for each year group carry some form of self-esteem builder, for example, Special Box or Magic Box. They are very important aspects of the sessions. Children will come to know that this will be a time when one child will receive some very positive, affirming messages. Knowing that everyone's turn will come is a great motivator to children to contribute positively to the sessions when someone else is the focus..

Closure Activities are included as a plenary and as a way to denote the end of Circle Time, while reflecting on the coverage of the session. The nature of the closure comments will mean that each session closes on a positive note. Taking off name badges and putting the classroom back into the usual arrangement will denote the change from Circle Time to the next curriculum slot.