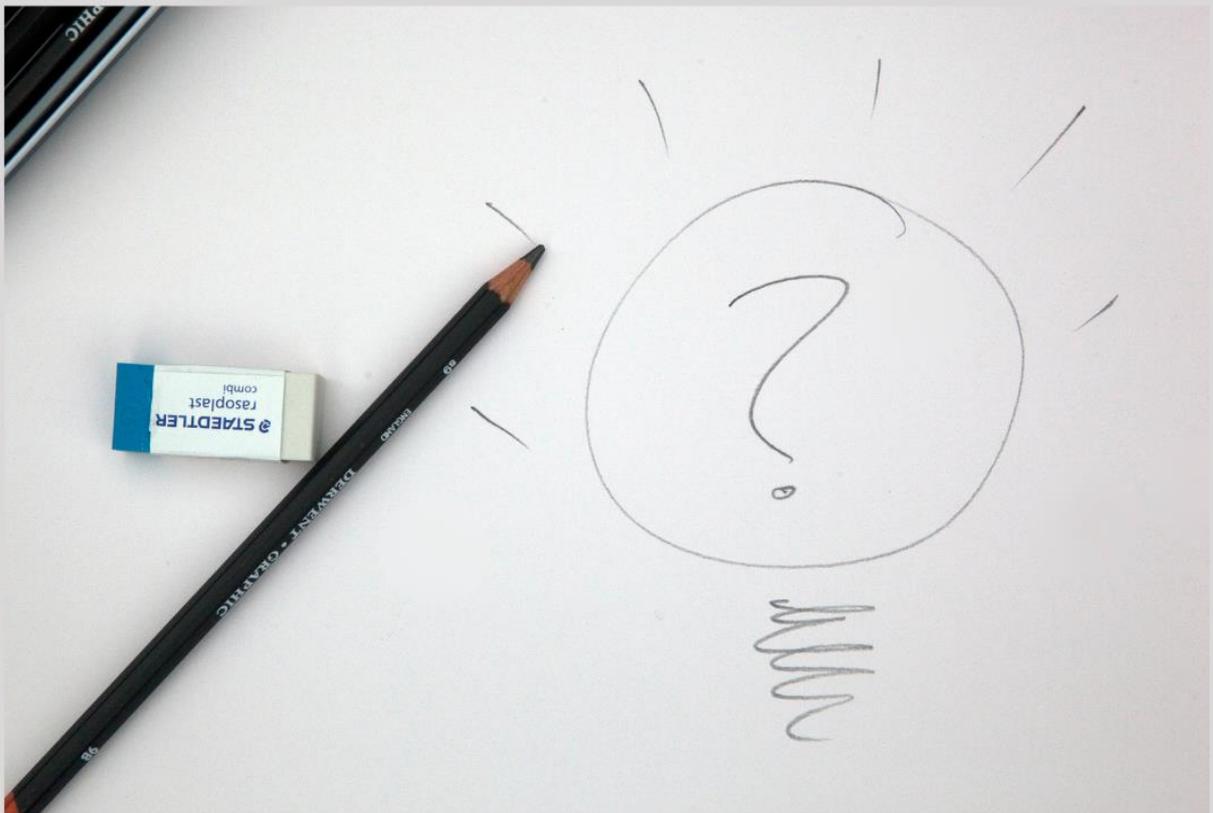




CSJ Counsel to  
Secure Justice



# Frequently Asked Questions

RESTORATIVE CIRCLES  
AND EMOTIONAL  
LEARNING



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## Restorative Circles and Social Emotional Learning<sup>1</sup>

### Frequently asked questions

#### *What is a restorative circle?*



A *restorative circle* is a communication model for a group of people.<sup>2</sup> The model is distinct because of the format used for the conversation. Participants sit facing each other in a circle. One person speaks at a time, and the opportunity to speak moves sequentially around the circle, using an object called a talking piece.<sup>3</sup> Each person waits to speak until they receive the talking piece and without interrupting the person who is speaking.

A restorative circle is based on the principles of connection, equality, and power sharing.<sup>4</sup> The aim of a restorative circle/circle process is to create space which allows for building relationships and voicing one's feelings and opinions.

#### *Where are restorative circles usually used?*

Circles can be used in any setting and with people from any age group. Circles can be used

- for building relationships;
- to support an individual (someone dealing with health difficulties, someone who is grieving, someone who has been harmed, someone who has recently been released from prison);
- for discussions on pre-decided topics;
- for making decisions collectively;
- for exchanging ideas on any topic;
- for resolving conflict (between two people, in a group).<sup>5</sup>

#### *Who are facilitators or circle keepers?*

Usually, two persons trained in holding circles facilitate the circle process and are called the facilitators or circle keepers.

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<sup>1</sup> Recommended citation: Counsel to Secure Justice. (2020). "Restorative Circles and Social Emotional Learning: Frequently Asked Questions". Accessed at: <https://csjindia.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Schumacher, A. (2014). Talking Circles for Adolescent Girls in an Urban High School: A Restorative Practices Program for Building Friendships and Developing Emotional Literacy Skills. *SAGE Open*, 4(4). doi: 10.1177/2158244014554204

<sup>3</sup> Pranis, K. (2005). *The little book of circle processes: A new/old approach to peacemaking*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books

<sup>4</sup> Schumacher (2014)

<sup>5</sup> Defining Restorative | Restorative Practices. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2020, from <https://www.iirp.edu/restorative-practices/defining-restorative/>

### ***What role do the facilitators/circle keepers play?***

- Facilitators/keepers design the process and ask pre-decided questions while also participating equally as all other participants.
- Sometimes, the facilitators/keepers speak first in a round to model the response or to model the type of sharing. Facilitators/keepers may also speak at the end of the round to avoid influencing the discussion.
- The facilitators/keepers may, on rare occasions, speak without the talking piece but only for reasons related to the process, not to speak on the content or what someone said.

### ***What does a circle process look like?***

A circle process has certain stages: <sup>6</sup>

1. Opening: The circle starts with an opening ritual which helps participants feel welcome, comfortable and transition to the circle.
2. Guidelines and values: The circle participants then create their own guidelines and values which guide the process.
3. Check-in: This is followed by a check-in round; a question eliciting a short response, this allows participants to get used to the talking piece, without being forced to think a lot.
4. Discussion: This is followed by a series of questions posed by the facilitators/keepers to guide the discussion.
5. Check-out: This is followed by a check-out, usually requiring a short quick response.
6. Closing: The circle process ends with a closing ritual to help participants transition out from the circle.



### ***What is the importance of rituals and ceremonies in circle processes?***

Circles involve opening and closing ceremonies, space for creating guidelines and check-ins and check-outs. The purpose of ritual and ceremony is that these are nonverbal forms of collective communication that develop and affirm shared understanding.<sup>7</sup> Circle rituals are a way of creating a space for new behaviors, which extend beyond the circle itself.<sup>8</sup> The rituals affirm behavior and understanding based on inclusiveness, equality, and respect for all participants.<sup>9</sup> With the collective involvement of everyone in circles, everyone is an equal part

<sup>6</sup> Pranis, K. (2005). *The little book of circle processes: A new/old approach to peacemaking*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

<sup>7</sup> Pranis (2005)

<sup>8</sup> Boyes-Watson, C. (2001). Healing the Wounds of Street Violence: Peacemaking Circles and Community Youth Development. *Community Youth Development Journal*, 2(4).

<sup>9</sup> Boyes-Watson (2001)



of the whole; there is no head, no hierarchy, no one sitting on the outside.<sup>10</sup> Each participant is offered respect and all are encouraged to speak from their own hearts and experiences.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Why do participants sit in a circle?***

- The facilitators/keepers sit in the circle. They neither command additional attention nor do they hold extra authority than the participants. This promotes a sense of equity, i.e., equal or fair opportunities to engage in discussion and learning.<sup>12</sup>
- Circles work best when the physical space has an open feeling of no barriers between participants, and no tables or desks in between. The circle creates a sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of 'sides'.<sup>13</sup>
- The seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and promotes effective eye contact and communication.<sup>14</sup>

### ***What are guidelines within the circle process?***

Participants in a circle play a major role in designing their own space by creating the guidelines for their discussion.<sup>15</sup> The guidelines articulate the agreements among participants about how they will conduct themselves in the circle dialogue. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviors that the participants feel will make the space safe for them. For example,

- 1) Speaking from the heart
- 2) Listening while others are speaking
- 3) Speaking while holding the talking piece
- 4) Keeping conversations in the circle confidential

### ***How are guidelines in the circle process different from rules?***

- Guidelines are not rigid constraints but supportive reminders of the behavioral expectations of everyone in the circle.
- They are not imposed on the participants by the facilitator/keeper but rather are adopted by consensus of the circle participants.
- In case of behavior which is not in harmony with the guidelines, participants are encouraged to remind the circle about the guidelines.

### ***Are guidelines effective in circle processes involving children?***

While a detailed and lengthy process of establishing guidelines may not always work for children, we believe it is important to enable children to create their own guidelines (as opposed to imposed rules) as these help translate circle aims of the empowerment, agency and equality into practice. For example – not using abusive language, not fighting within the room where we are having the circle. This enables the children to hold each other accountable,

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<sup>10</sup> Boyes-Watson (2001)

<sup>11</sup> Boyes-Watson (2001)

<sup>12</sup> Hung (2015 citing Esmonde, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> Hung (2015 citing Esmonde, 2009)

<sup>14</sup> Hung (2015 citing Esmonde, 2009)

<sup>15</sup> Pranis (2005)



minimizing the hierarchical role the facilitator/keeper needs to play. This helps promote autonomy as well as leadership skills.

***What conversation can happen in a circle?***

Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of many rounds to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the circle. Every member of the circle has an opportunity to respond to the prompting question or theme of each round, with an option to pass. Circle questions can be designed around any predetermined theme. The circles for children are designed to provide children safe and constructive engagement and space for social emotional learning.

***What is social emotional learning?***

Social emotional learning is the process of acquiring the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to recognize and manage emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively.<sup>16</sup>

***What are the components of social emotional learning?***

These are the main components of social emotional learning:<sup>17</sup>

<p><b>Self-Awareness</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Recognizing and naming one’s emotions</li> <li>b) Understanding the reasons and circumstances for feeling as one does</li> <li>c) Recognizing and naming others’ emotions</li> <li>d) Recognizing the strengths in, and mobilizing positive feelings about, self, family, and support networks</li> <li>e) Knowing one’s needs and values</li> <li>f) Believing in personal efficacy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Awareness</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Appreciating diversity</li> <li>b) Showing respect to others</li> <li>c) Listening carefully and accurately</li> <li>d) Increasing empathy and sensitivity to others’ feelings</li> <li>e) Understanding others’ perspectives, points of view, and feelings</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-Management And Organization</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Verbalizing and coping with anxiety, anger, and depression</li> <li>b) Controlling impulses, aggression, and self-destructive, antisocial behavior</li> <li>c) Managing personal and interpersonal stress</li> </ul>

<sup>16</sup> What is SEL?. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2020, from

<sup>17</sup> Elias, M., Parker, S., Kash, V., Weissburg, R., & O'Brien, M. *Social and Emotional Learning, Moral Education, and Character Education: A Comparative Analysis and a View Toward Convergence*. Retrieved from <https://www3.nd.edu/~dnarvaez/documents/Elias.pdf>



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>d) Focusing on tasks at hand</li><li>e) Setting short- and long-term goals</li><li>f) Planning thoughtfully and thoroughly</li><li>g) Modifying performance in light of feedback</li><li>h) Mobilizing positive motivation</li><li>i) Activating hope and optimism</li><li>j) Working toward optimal performance states</li></ul>
<b>Responsible Decision-Making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Analyzing situations perceptively and identifying problems clearly</li><li>b) Exercising social decision-making and problem-solving skills</li><li>c) Responding constructively and in a problem-solving manner to interpersonal obstacles</li><li>d) Engaging in self-evaluation and reflection</li><li>e) Conducting oneself with personal, moral, and ethical responsibility</li></ul>
<b>Relationship Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Managing emotions in relationships, harmonizing diverse feelings and viewpoints</li><li>b) Showing sensitivity to social-emotional cues</li><li>c) Expressing emotions effectively</li><li>d) Communicating clearly</li><li>e) Engaging others in social situations</li><li>f) Building relationships</li><li>g) Working cooperatively</li><li>h) Exercising assertiveness, leadership, and persuasion</li><li>i) Managing conflict, negotiation, refusal</li><li>j) Providing, seeking help</li></ul>

### ***Why do children involved in the legal system need social emotional learning?***

For children involved in the legal system, prior experiences of trauma, abuse, and neglect are likely to have undermined early stages of social and emotional development.<sup>18</sup> Social emotional learning is linked to success in life, including achievement in academics, at work, healthy decision making and successful relationships.<sup>19</sup> For children involved in the legal system, social emotional learning is a crucial aspect of ensuring effective rehabilitation and social reintegration.<sup>20</sup>

### ***How do circles help to implement social emotional learning?***

Circles allow for focused time to discuss and practice skills related to social emotional learning. Best practice social emotional learning programs enable designated time for skill development, focus on specific skills, allow for actively practicing these skills, and are taught through sequenced activities.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, restorative circles allow for sequenced, focused, explicit and active spaces for learning and practicing skills that constitute social emotional learning.

### ***Why is the circle process more effective than other models?***

The circle format allows for children to be actively engaged rather than simply being lectured at. Such experiential learning allows children



- to become actively involved;
- to think of ideas and solutions;
- to make decisions and take leadership roles;
- to practice and apply newly learned skills and knowledge.

In the circle, every child's voice is important in the process. By allowing the opportunity to speak without interruption, children who may not otherwise speak may feel safe enough to speak. Children also begin to actively listen during the circle. Children begin to practice social emotional learning skills learnt during the circle process. As there is no hierarchy and no judgment, children feel more safe to share in their learning.

### ***How many children can be involved in a restorative circle?***

Circle-keepers can hold circles for up to ten children at a time.

<sup>18</sup> Beyer, L. *Social and Emotional Learning and Traditionally Underserved Populations* [Ebook]. American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from [https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEL-Special-Populations\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEL-Special-Populations_Final.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> What is SEL?. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2020, from

<sup>20</sup> Beyer, L. *Social and Emotional Learning and Traditionally Underserved Populations* [Ebook]. American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from [https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEL-Special-Populations\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEL-Special-Populations_Final.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2007). *The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning



### ***How are restorative circles designed to be child-friendly?***

Restorative circles for children are designed to include games and art which is age-appropriate. Games and physical activities in circles are designed with specific aims. Some activities are designed to make children feel safe and comfortable. Others are designed to help children focus. Some social emotional learning skills are interweaved through some games. Art is used to help children feel safe, to engage and to explore their emotions.

### ***Do we try to change children's opinions through a circle?***

Circles are never about persuasion. They are a process of exploring meaning from each perspective in the circle. From that exploration we may find common ground, or we may understand more clearly why another person sees something differently.

### ***How are circles a tool for implementing experiential learning?***

Circles allow for experiential learning as they prioritize listening over lecturing, focus on the children's experience and build relationships with children rather than with concepts and theory.

### ***What is the benefit of restorative circles?***

These circles can help benefit children individually and also promise to influence the environment of the CCI since the aim of the restorative circles is to allow for:

- improving *social-emotional learning* skills including building an expansive emotional vocabulary, learning techniques for expressing emotions in healthy ways, imbibing techniques to deal with difficult emotions<sup>22</sup>;
- developing *empathy* for their own families by thinking through the impact on them
- fostering a sense of *accountability*: helping children to understand the impact of their actions<sup>23</sup>;
- having space to meaningfully reflect on their actions including what lead them to harm others<sup>24</sup>;
- reducing *bullying and violence* within the home and reducing power hierarchies<sup>25</sup>;
- talking about social issues such as gender, caste and consent in a non-hierarchical, non-judgmental and empathetic way to bring about change in harmful belief patterns.

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<sup>22</sup> Hulvershorn, K., & Mulholland, S. (2018). Restorative practices and the integration of social emotional learning as a path to positive school climates. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 11(1), 110-123. doi: 10.1108/jrit-08-2017-0015

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., The Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2014). *The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System*. The Council of State Governments Justice Center.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., The Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2014). *The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System*. The Council of State Governments Justice Center.

<sup>25</sup> See, for e.g., Ministry of Education, New Zealand. (2011). *A preliminary evaluation of restorative practices in New Zealand schools Ten case studies*. Retrieved from [http://pukekoresearch.com/pages/9/An\\_evaluation\\_of\\_restorative\\_practices\\_in\\_New\\_Zeal.pdf](http://pukekoresearch.com/pages/9/An_evaluation_of_restorative_practices_in_New_Zeal.pdf)



### ***Is there any evidence of these programs?***

Across the world, similar programs have significantly benefitted at-risk and justice system-involved youth and evidence shows that these programs can “*dramatically reduce reoffending*” among at-risk and misbehaving young people.<sup>26</sup> These programs also help develop high self-esteem.<sup>27</sup>

### ***What age group of children can we invite to a circle?***

A circle can work for any age group of children. From our practice, we have seen that a majorly homogenous age group of children allows for more effective circles as children have different attention spans and interest based on age. If we hold a circle for a group of children of similar age, we can tailor activities to meet needs of most participants.

### ***How frequently can we hold a circle?***

We usually hold a circle for children on a weekly basis. However, circles can be used as frequently as is needed and can be short and brief focusing on only one or two questions.

### ***Where can I learn more about restorative circles?***

- Pranis, K. (2005). *The little book of circle processes: A new/old approach to peacemaking*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

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<sup>26</sup> Beyer, L. *Social and Emotional Learning and Traditionally Underserved Populations* [Ebook]. American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from [https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEL-Special-Populations\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEL-Special-Populations_Final.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Mirsky L., & Wachtel, T. (2007). The worst school I’ve ever been to: Empirical evaluations of a restorative school and treatment milieu. *Reclaiming Children and Youth: The Journal of Strength-based Interventions*, 16(2), 13-16. Retrieved from <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=71555c94-592e-4d8d-a9ed-9c2b5f14870b%40sessionmgr120>