

Circle time: Making large group activities work

The overhead lights flash and Ms. Rodriguez moves to take her place on the carpeted floor. Most of the children wander over to join her. The stage is set for the learning day to officially begin.



In the corporate world, large group gatherings are routine opportunities designed to give participants time to share the experiences that build a team. Just as in the business world, gathering players face-to-face has powerful benefits. An office manager strives to have all the employees on the same page, guiding focus, tool use, and goals in a collaborative atmosphere.

In preschool and elementary classrooms, these large group gatherings are generally referred to as circle time, a deliberate and routine part of the day that helps build an early learning community. The purpose of the circle time gathering is much the same as a business team meeting: setting a theme,

introducing new materials, reviewing progress, and establishing learning and activity goals.

Benefits

Research and anecdotal evidence indicate the need for social interaction and emotional regulation in young children. Just as in the other developmental domains, social and emotional development are built on meaningful, supportive, and authentic experiences with adults and with other children. Circle times, then, have as their main goal social interaction among the children and between the children and the group leader, whether that leader is a teacher, a visitor, or even a featured video clip.

When circle times are simply a stage for teacher talk, the opportunity for children's social and emotional growth is thwarted, and the gathering generally degenerates into endless guidance directives from the teacher and demands for attention from one or two children. Unfortunately, this leaves most of the children sitting and wondering why this gathering is such a necessary interruption from art, block building, or pretend play in the housekeeping area.

Similarly, attempts at large group gatherings of toddlers are likely to fail. Attention span is too short, and sense of self is too important for a toddler to share the space and attention of a teacher with several peers. With toddlers, you're more likely to find success in groups of two or three children, even when the activity is repeated several times throughout the day.

Successful early childhood circle times are short, respectful opportunities for active interaction, group problem-solving, and well-scaffolded learning. While working in a group, children are invited into relationship with others to make social comparisons and to gradually shift perspective from an egocentric *I* and *Me* to a social *We* and *Ours*.

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Best practices

Too often circle time is a late morning gathering that asks for children's attention to a calendar, the weather, a song, and a book. On the surface this gathering might have some benefits, but they are generally benefits to the teacher who seeks to transition the children from free play to lunch and naptime.

WELCOME CHILDREN TO THE GROUP BY NAME.

Best practices, instead, focus on children's needs: supporting new learning, introducing new skills, offering an opportunity to reinforce and elaborate established skills, and sharing skills with others. Best practices in circle time demand that you are deliberate in structuring the time and attentive to the interests and needs of individual children and children as a group.

So what do you need for a successful circle time? Foremost, you need space. Young children are slow to develop **proprioception**, a sense of where their bodies are in space. Some children are hyperaware of how close they are to other children, while some are totally unaware of how their body parts might infringe on the space of another. Strive to make your

circle time area large enough to afford each child some personal space but small enough to reinforce the concept of group or community. Successful teachers spend less time directing children to a particular body position (crossed legs, back straight) and instead invite the comfort that contributes to receptive attention.

Typically teachers carve a large meeting space in a corner of the classroom so that access to props (a calendar, easel, books, or flannel board pieces, for example) is fluid.

After you establish adequate space, you need a plan. Because children rely on **consistency** for the emotional comfort that comes with knowing what happens next, it's wise to develop a template for your circle time and work to stick to it. Some classrooms of kindergarten-age children open with a pledge to the flag, and some church-housed programs start with a prayer. How you start doesn't matter as much as having a consistent beginning and predictable format.

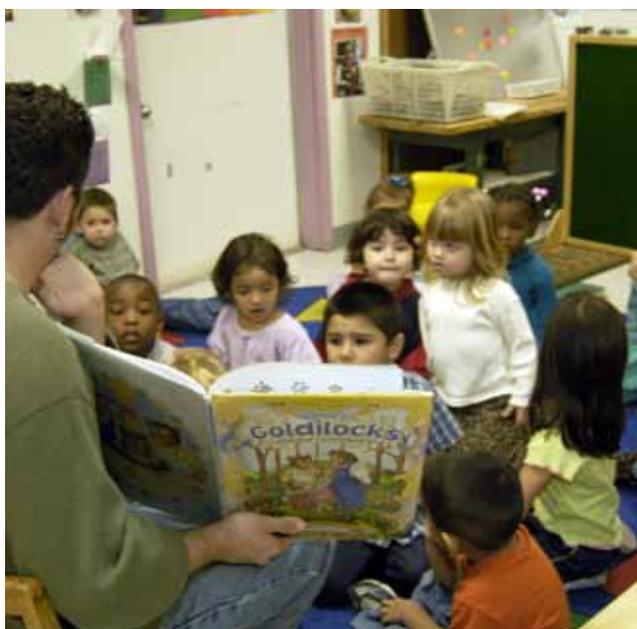
If you're interested in planning circle times with a social development focus, consider scheduling the gathering early in the day and start with handshakes or other introductions. (It takes time for children to learn each other's names. It's always surprising that even after months in a shared classroom, some children are unknown to others. Check http://drjean.org/html/monthly_act/act_2014/01_Jan_css/pg02.html for some clever handshake ideas.) Welcome children to the group by name—spoken or in song—and invite them to join the group.

Respect the attention span of the children and plan circle times for young preschoolers that last no longer than 10 minutes. Primary grade children may be able to stay focused for up to 30 minutes.

Continue building your circle time template, formula, or plan with purpose. What do you want this group gathering to do? What do you want to share? Is circle time simply what you (and other teachers) have always done, a spot on the schedule that must be filled? It can be so much better than just a time filler.

Again, best practices suggest that the gathering relates directly to the interests and needs of the children in the group. Keep in mind that active, hands-on learning is always more effective than even your most brilliant lecture. Just as you have an overall plan for the day, use circle time to home in on a theme, new material, or project, for example. From

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this focus you can integrate a variety of activities, such as moving, dancing, storytelling, reading, singing, acting, and playing musical instruments, that can help guarantee success.

You can incorporate calendar and weather checks; introductions to new materials and equipment; observation and exploration; group votes; and reporting (and dictating) information on group projects. In your plan, make sure to include a system for dismissing children from the group effectively and efficiently.

Tips for group time structure

Plan large group time to include three distinct sections: a gathering/welcoming time, an activity focus, and a closing/dismissal transition. Note that some primary grade classrooms have two large group meetings, one early in the day to share and plan and one late in the day to recap and report. The format of these meetings may be abbreviated from what is described below.

Gathering. Work to make this large group time something the children eagerly anticipate. Sit on the floor, or on a low stool, with the children to make eye-to-eye contact easier. Decide ahead of time how you will beckon the children, especially at the start of the year. Consider ringing a bell, flashing a light, or even playing a tune on a rhythm instrument. Often a familiar song or finger play will get children's attention. Experienced teachers often wear an apron or smock. A pocket in your smock will let you

keep a surprise prop at the ready.

Use children's names to welcome them into the group. For new groups, encourage the children to repeat each child's name; older children can clap out the syllables in the child's name. Make sure every child is welcomed and is comfortable. If you want the children to have specific places to sit, plan to spend time helping the children identify and settle into their places.

MAKE THE BOOK A CONVERSATION STARTER.

Activity focus. Clearly identify the activities you plan for the large group. Choose your focus according to developmental levels of the children, their interests, ongoing class projects, or special events (like an impending field trip). Communicate your plan. Even a 3-year-old will appreciate knowing that you will listen to a song, sing the song, and dance to the song. Older children might be invited to add to the activity agenda with, for example, a request for help in settling a dispute or solving a problem.

If you plan to include music or a book in the activity time, choose deliberately. For example, select a book that relates to the interests and activities of the children, avoiding the temptation to grab whatever is closest. Before sharing the book with the group, read it and plan when you will ask for feedback from the children. Make the book a conversation starter.

Some large group gatherings include a formal opportunity for sharing daily news, time for children to share a story. Some stories might be dictated and transcribed to chart paper to read again, some invite creative drama, and others might suggest voting or other problem-solving techniques. Remember the primary purpose of the large group gathering is socialization. Children need time to talk about what matters to them. They deserve to have attentive, engaged listeners.

Most important, end the activity when it's clear that you've lost the children's attention and interest. Stay flexible and tweak your plan when, for example,

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a child has an accident and enters the group with a bandaged hand, or an electric storm interrupts power and the lights flicker. The group will be interested in the immediate events—and may be distracted—so adjust your well-made plan and talk about what is most interesting at the time.

Closing. Have a plan for dismissing the children to the next activity. Some of the books in the resource list offer suggestions for transitioning to snack, outdoors, free play, or specific learning centers.

Sample activities

Below are samples of two circle/large group times. Use them as guidelines, not as specific plans. Always adapt your plan to the needs, interests, and developmental skills of the children in your group.

Circle time 1

Background. It's early in the school year and most of the 3-year-olds are new to the program. Most of the children are mastering the transition from home, and only a few are still weepy when their parents leave for the day. However, the children's play lacks social engagement. Few know each other's names and are tentative in their interactions with each other. Most of the children wander among the learning centers touching materials but not actively investigating. They understand that lunch and naptime break up the day, but they seem to perceive the routines of the day's schedule as arbitrary and don't yet have a good idea of how they should behave in the group.

Gathering. Mr. Black sits on the rug and sings the first verse of *Where Is Thumbkin*. As his singing draws the attention of some children, he substitutes the names of the children in the song: "Where is Susan?" "Where is José?" As each child sings, "Here I am," Mr. Black offers his hand to shake and then pats a spot on the floor for the child to sit.

Activity. Mr. Black tells the group that today they will do three things in circle time: play a game, read a book, and sing a song.

The game. Where Does It Go? Mr. Black has collected objects from each of the classroom interest areas: an apron, a paintbrush, a tambourine, a puzzle piece, a block, and a seashell, for example. He shows each object and gives the children time to talk about what it is (vocabulary) and how it's used. Then he asks, "Where does it go?" He allows the children to

point or call out ideas. When the group is clear about the proper location for the object, he draws a child's name from a cloth bag and asks that child to put the prop in its proper place. Through the activity Mr. Black gains knowledge about the children's familiarity with particular props, their vocabulary skills, and their willingness and eagerness to engage with the group.

The book. *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* by Will Hillenbrand. Mr. Black invites the children to adjust their positions so that they can see the book while giving their neighbors space to be comfortable too. He reads the title and asks if any of the children know the song that goes with the words. He sings the variation of the song (printed in the book) and pauses after reading the line "I'm scared this first day of school." He gives the children time to talk about their fears, gaining valuable insight into the children's emotional and social development.

The song. Clean-up song. Mr. Black revisits the topic of clean-up time and tells the children that they will use a specific song throughout the year when it's time to put away center materials. First he sings (to the tune of *Heigh Ho* from Walt Disney's *Snow White*):

Heigh ho, heigh ho,
It's clean-up time you know,
It's time to put our tools away,
Heigh ho, heigh ho.

Mr. Black invites the children to join him in singing the song. Then he asks them to stand and march to the song, singing it loudly, then softly, and then in a whisper. This activity gives Mr. Black information on the children's physical skills—large muscle and muscle integration.

Closing. Mr. Black stops the marching momentarily to direct the children to march to their choice of interest area for free play.

Circle time 2

Background. This group of 5-year-olds has been together for several months, and most of the children have been together for at least two years. They are familiar and confident with most classroom materials and equipment and are comfortable in the consistent routine of the day. Recently they have demonstrated an interest in building construction—

and destruction. Over several weeks they've watched as bulldozers and a crane demolished an old home across the playground and have followed the progress of ground preparation for the new office building that will go up in its place. The class has been engaged in a long-term project on construction stability. (The children live in an area that has occasional earthquake tremors.)

Gathering. The children know that the class will gather on the floor immediately after the breakfast snack. Their teacher, Ms. Appleby, is already on the floor welcoming the children as they join the group. She invites them to pair up to play Scissor, Paper, Stone until all the children are gathered. In preparation for this group time, Ms. Appleby has added the words *inclined plane*, *force*, *mechanical advantage* and *ramp* to the simple machine/construction vocabulary chart on the wall. She is prepared to record children's observations with a large sheet of paper and marker.

Activity. Ms. Appleby tells the group that in this circle time they will continue their exploration of simple machines—this time with inclined planes—and that she has a book that they will read together.

The exploration. Ms. Appleby points to the new words that she has added to the construction vocabulary chart and uses this time to learn both about the children's growing literacy skills and their understanding of the basic physics they've explored over the past few weeks. When she asks for an example of force, for example, the children can demonstrate *thrust*, *drag*, *torque*, and *pressure* with their bodies.

Ms. Appleby shows the group a flat wooden board and a matchbox car. She places the car on the board and asks for observations. She's prepared with probing questions: What will make the car move? Will it move by itself? She records the children's observations.

She then places a block under one end of the board, making that end higher than the other. She places the car at the high end of the board and again asks for observations. With her questions she helps the children recognize that the inclined plain adds mechanical advantage to the task of lifting, loading, or moving an object: it requires less force to move up an inclined plane than it does to lift straight up. She again records the children's observations.

Last, Ms. Appleby asks the children to think about and share how they've seen inclined planes at work

at the construction site next door. (These might include, for example, bulldozers moving dirt and debris, concrete flowing from a truck, and a wheelbarrow ramp across the sidewalk.) She encourages the children to identify the inclined planes in their construction stability project and unit block play.

The book. *This Is the House that Jack Built* by Simms Taback. Ms. Appleby shows the cover of the book to the group and reads the title and author's name. Before starting to read, she asks for predictions about whether this will be a serious, nonfiction book about house construction. She tells the group that the book is based on an old English nursery rhyme and invites them to recite the cumulative text with her. After a few cumulative verses, she reads only the new lines and lets the children complete the verse without her.

Closing. Ms. Appleby ends the group gathering by drawing names from a bag and directing children to the established classroom community chores that happen before free play: feeding the fish, adding water to the guinea pig bottle, wiping the puzzle table, putting out paintbrushes, and so forth.

Resources

- Charner, Kathy. 2005. *The Giant Encyclopedia of Transition Activities for Children 3 to 6*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.
- Feldman, Jean and R. Jones. 1996. *Transition Time: Let's Do Something Different*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.
- Pica, Rae. 2003. *Teachable Transitions*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House. ■