Introduction

What Is Circle Time?

Circle time is a planned time during the children’s daily schedule—a time when children come together with one another and an adult who is important in their lives, such as a teacher, child care provider, or group leader. It can be held twice a day or once a day, perhaps midmorning after outdoor play. The encompassing nature of the circle allows young children to feel secure as individuals in a group setting. As they face each other in the circle, they develop a natural awareness of their own places and the other children’s membership in the group. This time encourages everyone to communicate ideas, respond to each other and listen respectfully, and to have fun together.

What Happens During Circle Time?

Circle time presents adults with an exciting challenge to plan a variety of interesting activities. Educational and entertaining activities for three- to six-year-olds are plentiful in the chapters of this book. Use the ideas for transitions, the basics (letters, colors, numbers, shapes), science projects, language games, finger plays, stories, music and movement, social fun, and imagination stretchers.

To help the children become focused and anticipate the day’s activities, encourage them to take an active part in planning their projects during circle time. Be flexible, though, as their brainstorming of ideas may take off in all directions. Equally important is giving the children time later on to share their discoveries with each other through discussions, charting ideas, drawings, recordings, and so forth. Here are some exciting things that happen to children in circle time:

Thinking Is Stimulated

Many circle time activities correspond to themes in which the children have shown great interest, such as “pets,” “colors,” “hats,” or “things that have wings.” Children have many opportunities to handle and observe real objects related to these themes. They can then begin to think along more abstract lines. As children observe and manipulate materials, they describe them and consider other aspects of the activities. This promotes the development of a whole new vocabulary when the images and words become connected (yellow + blue = green).

Children learn to
make decisions during circle time. The toddlers can decide where to sit—indepen-
dence is very important for them. The more self-reliant preschoolers can deter-
mine where to move the sheet and table to make a cave for a theme. The five- and
six-year-olds can show off their creative thinking to complete a riddle.

The Senses Are Heightened

During circle time using all the senses, including taste and smell, helps the chil-
dren focus on their immediate environment. In turn, this focusing aids in
increasing their attention spans. While playing rhythm instruments, young chil-
dren use their sense of hearing to pick out patterns and tones. These important lis-
tening skills continue to be critical throughout their lives. Looking across the
circle to see a color-matching exchange requires keen visual filtering skills. And
playing touching games, such as feeling the difference between soft and hard
items, strengthens tactile perceptions.

Try to give directions that speak to the children's preferred sensory learning
styles. The hearing oriented child hears you tell him to “move three steps.” The
visually oriented child will “stop” when she sees you raise your hand. And the
touch oriented child knows to “move forward” when you touch her shoulder.

Physical Skills Are Enhanced

Young children enjoy and need a variety of motor activities. They become excited as
they see and feel what their bodies can do. They develop their large muscles as they
walk like animals, and they refine their small muscles during a finger play. They
develop arm and foot coordination skills while mirroring each other. Hand-eye
coordination is promoted as they roll a yarn ball to a player across the circle and
make an instant connection. Processing directions and putting them in motion
requires listening to the steps, then translating them with the body.

Social Awareness Is Promoted

By taking turns and sharing materials, children tune into themselves and others.
They learn that what they do has an impact on another child in the circle. For
instance, if one child grabs a ball, the other child might cry or become angry
and hit the first child. Feelings can be hurt, too, such as when one child laughs
unkindly at another’s comments or ideas. Circle time is the perfect place to discuss
feelings, practice negotiation skills, and learn to solve problems together.

Have them retell stories and sing familiar songs (children love “Jingle Bells” all year
long). Knowing the words builds their social confidence. Children learn social
graces from others. By simply thanking a child for picking up the streamers, you
have served as an important role model.

Emotional Development Is Fostered

Singing a ritual song each morning is a great comfort to many children as they
fold into the security of the circle. Because they feel comfortable in this environment, they are often willing to take risks by answering a question or trying a new task. They may even feel empowered to turn on the tape recorder. And they probably will be delighted if you tell them “Good job!”

Circle time is a good time to release anxiety and tension. Practice dispelling anger with a verse of “If you’re angry and you know it, stamp your feet!” This time is also for laughing together and enjoying a silly riddle. And be sure children understand that they may sit quietly and watch if they don’t want to jump up and down with the others.

**A Community Is Established**

The shape of the circle draws everyone in with its welcoming atmosphere that suggests “I have a place” and “we have all come together.” There is a natural acceptance of others’ cultures and styles as these are shared daily through songs, the arts, foods, and self-expression. Through games and discussions, children learn to celebrate similarities and differences. Importantly, the circle time area is a place where children may express their thoughts and feelings and others will listen and respond.

**Gather Together—Make the Transition**

To start circle time, children need to make the transition from their past activity. A transition is an activity that helps them move easily from one place or project to the next. Provide children with clear, simple signals so they are aware that they must finish up their current activities and clean them up to get ready for circle time. Give them enough notice. Try some of these ideas to get the group’s attention:

- Signal with hand gestures or a touch on the arm.
- Ring a bell with a pleasant tone.
- Strike a chord on the piano or tap a tambourine.
- Blink the lights.

Draw children to the circle time area with a fun invitation. See if they can follow a path of bubbles along the way. Or, you may want to stick on the floor sets of funky footprints to follow. Go to the area to greet the arrivals.

Make it exciting.

Use a finger play or an easy-to-join-in action song.

Begin with a comforting, familiar welcome song so the children know circle time has started.

**Look at the Location**

Designate a specific meeting area. It is less confusing for the children when they know exactly where to go each time. Find a quiet place in the room away from distractions. The floor should be soft, warm, and comfortable to sit on. A low-pile rug is ideal. Position the circle time area near electrical outlets so you can plug in projectors or recorders. Add an adult-size chair to use so the children can easily see your props at story time. A flannel board, magnetic board, and an easel for chart
paper are necessities. Try to organize materials with storage bins or shelves to hold markers, cutouts, musical instruments, tapes, and so forth to encourage spontaneous play as well as aid in cleanup.

To help manage children's behavior, some adults prefer to have them sit on individual carpet squares or assign a spot on the rug. At a glance, determine if everyone is comfortable and ready—sitting on their bottoms, no toys in their hands. Perhaps have a helpful adult sit next to children who are having difficulty settling in.

**Variety Is the Spice**

Activities need to be age- or developmentally appropriate. Otherwise, children may find them too frustrating or too long and lose interest. This book displays a handprint symbol showing the level of difficulty for each activity:

- Easy
- Moderate
- Challenging

Consider a balance in the activities. Older children may prefer one long project during the session. Or, they may sit and listen to a story and then need to follow this still activity with a movement game. Preschoolers seem to enjoy predictable short routines—a welcome song, short story, action song, guessing game, good-bye finger play. Balance adult-directed activities and those that involve the children's ideas and interests. If the adult does all the talking, the children miss out on participation.

**Quick Fixes for Sidetracked Youngsters**

We know that children do not all learn in the same ways. When everyone is together, it is hard for some children to do exactly what everyone else is doing. To remedy this, try these ideas:

- Acknowledge restlessness. Try "wiggle removers" (shake up/down, dance with colored flashlights).
- Initiate lively, then quiet, animal motions and sounds.
- Break out of the circle mode. Spread out in a horseshoe shape, in two double lines, or in a straight line.
- Ask for a rule review, such as, Where do we dance? Give them one guess, then pass.
- Pair a helpful partner with a child who's having difficulty.
- Regroup with an old favorite game or song.
- Use a freeze or stop signal if things are out of control.
- Change the time of day. After free play or before snack may be better.

**Winding Down**

Help cue the children that circle time is almost over. You may sing a favorite good-bye song if it is the end of the day. Let children know where they are going next and how they are going to get there. Give clear directions, and send a small number at a time to keep things under control and pleasant for everyone. Make the conclusion of circle time as enjoyable as the beginning.