

How to Lead a Post-Thanksgiving Classroom Circle

Overview

Want to help your students transition back together smoothly after the long Thanksgiving break?

Here is a post-Thanksgiving circle we found very successful this week in 4th and 6th grade classrooms.

We noticed that this is a great circle for deepening relationship-building and trust amongst the group, as well as rebuilding a sense of community after being apart for vacation. We were impressed to find that students were very focused and attentive for this particular circle (they especially loved the ice breaker game, shown below!).



What you'll need:

- Enough chairs for all students and any participating adults
- A talking piece of your choice (can be anything appropriate for the kids: a leaf, stone, feather, trinket, stuffed animal, etc.)

DIRECTIONS

Step 1) Prepare the Circle

Prior to beginning, set up the chairs in a circle formation and obtain an item you will use as a talking piece.

Step 2) Introduce (or Refresh on) the Circle Guidelines

At the start of any circle, it can be helpful to make sure everyone is clear on circle guidelines. Even if your students are familiar with circles, briefly refreshing their memory is always a good idea. If you're unsure, you may wish to ask the students if they've ever sat in circle like this, to get an idea of their level of experience. (One particular student of ours, for instance, shared a great story of how he sits in circles with his family).



> **INTRO FOR A FIRST TIME CIRCLE.** If this is most of their first time, begin by introducing the following concepts...

- Whoever has the talking piece will be the only one talking, and everyone else gives that person their 100% full attention. You will get your turn to share and be our circle leader when it gets to you.
- If you don't know what to say, it is always okay to pause for a moment, take a breath, and think about what we want to say. It's also okay to say "pass," and we will send the talking piece around an extra time after each question to give the people who "passed" another chance to share if they'd like.
- Explain to students that circles are special in that we "listen and speak from the heart." This means that we give the speaker our 100% attention when they're talking, instead of rehearsing what we're going to say next, talking to our friends, or getting distracted like we so often do in conversations. It also means that when we speak, we simply say whatever is true for us and that's it's perfectly okay to talk about our feelings. We take our time but also keep our talking brief enough to respect the fact that we have a lot of people to get to, limited time, and everyone's thoughts are important.
- **OPTIONAL:** Instead of simply lecturing the students on these concepts, you can ask what *they* think circle culture is like. You can try questions like, "what does 'listening from the heart' mean to you?" or "how do you know if someone is giving you their full attention," "how do we act when we're in circle?" or "what do you think it's like to have someone listen to you with their heart?"

> **INTRO FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCED WITH CIRCLES**

- Check in with questions like "does anyone remember how we listen in circle?" or "who remembers how we treat the talking piece?" and fill in any gaps with the information above.

***OPTIONAL FOR BOTH: A Brief "*Listen and Speak From the Heart*" Activity**

- With one hand on your heart and one hand cupped at your ear, ask the students to try out this same gesture. While their hands are on their hearts, instruct the circle to try making an "ah" tone together, all at the same time, on the count of three, and see if they can feel their hearts vibrate as they speak. ("Ready? 1-2-3-Ahhhhhhh!"). Some students may giggle. This is perfectly okay. Repeat the tone together one more time, this time instructing them to listen to the sound of everyone's voices together in the room. (*Note: this exercise can be calming and is a kinesthetic way to help students remember to "listen and speak with their hearts." It also teaches them a "hand-on-heart-hand-on-ear" gesture you can use in the future to remind students how we show up).

Step 3) Ice-Breaker Game "Guess The Leader"

Ask the students to repeat after you. Start demonstrating three different hand motions: 1) clapping your hands, 2) snapping your fingers, and 3) patting your thighs. For this game, one person will close their eyes in the center of the circle while one other student is quietly chosen as the "leader," unbeknownst to the center student (make sure center student isn't peeking!). When you say go, the leader will begin making a song with the three hand motions in whatever order they want, changing them up frequently, as the rest of the circle copies what they're doing. It is the center students' job to open their eyes and try to guess who is leading the music. They have three guesses to identify the leader. If they succeed, they now go to the center of the circle. Do two or three rounds of this.

Step 4) First Prompt: Favorite Thanksgiving Break Moments

Now that the class is warmed up, we'll begin a round with the talking piece. Since the class has recently been on Thanksgiving break, offer up the prompt:

"Tell us about a favorite moment that you remember from your Thanksgiving break. It doesn't have to be from Thanksgiving day, it could be anything at all." Ask who would like to go first and let them begin with the talking piece, sharing a story of their choice, then passing the piece clockwise. When everyone has shared, do a second round only for the students who "passed," asking if anything has come to them now that they'd like to contribute (if they still wish to pass that is okay, but many students will participate when given a second chance).

Step 5) Full Circle Check In

Ask the class how they think that went using the talking piece (have students raise their hands and call on people to share what they noticed went well and things that were challenging). Ask students to use the Thumbs-Up Method to show how well they felt listened to when they were talking: if their thumb is pointing up, it went great. If they point to the side it was so-so. If they point down, then not so well.

Step 6) Second Prompt: What are We Grateful For?

Now, do a second circle (you may wish to remind students to practice any new behaviors that were brought up -- i.e., we're going to practice projecting our voices louder this time when we have the talking piece so we can all hear each other). In the spirit of this season, offer the prompt, "tell us something you're grateful for," and ask who would like to begin with the talking piece. Follow the same procedure above, doing a second round for any students who passed.

Step 7) "Fish Bowl" Check In With Adults and Students

For one final check-in, ask all adults and three student volunteers to bring their chairs to the center of the circle. Instruct everyone on the outside circle to simply listen for a moment while we do a quick meeting about how it went. We call this double circle arrangement "Fish Bowl" as the outside circle can simply look in and observe the inside. With very brief shares, pass the talking piece around the small inner circle for the open questions: "how do you think the circle went today? Anything that went well? What improvements could we make?" We've found that students naturally love to hear what adults are saying about them and this process piques their curiosity and gets their focus. It's a great way to give some praise and maybe make small comments about ideas for making it even better next time.

Step 8) Close with a Clap

Return all chairs to the outer circle, instruct everyone to stand up, and on the count of three we'll all do one big, loud clap together to finish. ("1-2-3-CLAP!"). Be sure to thank the students for participating.

> Integrating this Circle with Curriculum

If your students enjoyed this circle, how can you incorporate it into your curriculum? You may wish to have them write a story about their experience over Thanksgiving break or perhaps a poem about something they are grateful for. What other ways can you think of to integrate these themes? The sky's the limit!

Wishing you a successful circle and a smooth transition back from the holiday.

Sincerely,

All of us at the Center for Restorative Process