**Circle Discussions for Staff**

This discussion guide can be used for ongoing conversations about social and emotional learning throughout the year. It can be used in work settings (for example, teacher team meetings) or community discussion groups.

When you make space for your group to talk about SEL regularly, it underscores its importance, it creates natural opportunities for collaboration and collective thinking on how to improve, and it provides a “temperature check” so you can better understand how your group is feeling and what additional support may be needed.

This guide includes:

* [What is a circle discussion?](#bookmark=id.3dy6vkm)
* [Set up checklist](#bookmark=id.1t3h5sf)
* [Circle process](#bookmark=id.4d34og8)
* [Sample questions](#bookmark=id.2s8eyo1)

**What is a Circle Discussion?**

In a circle discussion, participants are seated in a circle. Each person has a turn to respond to a question or prompt, one at a time and without interruptions or back-and-forth discussion, as a talking piece is passed around the circle. The talking piece is an object that can be easily passed from one person to another to signal who may speak.

The purpose of a circle discussion is to share feelings, thoughts, and stories, and to connect to others. The structure of a circle removes hierarchy, makes room for all voices to be heard, and encourages everyone to feel that they can be open and honest with the group. The regular use of circle discussions strengthens trust and empathy which are key to building relationships. Circle discussions can be used for a variety of purposes, from setting norms to solving problems, and in multiple contexts including staff meetings, classrooms, and discussions outside of a school setting.

**Set up checklist**

Prepare the following materials before you begin.

* **Talking Piece** – an object that is passed around the circle and used to ensure that only one person talks while others listen. Some groups use the same talking piece for every circle, others may ask a different group member to provide a talking piece for each meeting so that each has an opportunity to share an object that has significance for them. Examples: an object found in nature, a soft or squishy ball, a mascot figurine, or other sensory object.
* **Centerpiece** - something placed in the center of the circle to provide a place to focus, a sense of warmth and calm, or a sense of connection.   Examples: a colorful piece of fabric or small rug with a few small items such as flowers, feathers, LED candles, a bowl of smooth stones, a plant, or artwork.
* **Shared Agreements –** Make a poster or card to display and reference at the beginning of the circle discussion, reminding the group of any agreements or norms you have developed together about how to engage during and after a circle discussion. Examples: One person speaks at a time, speak and listen from your heart, give your focus and empathy to the person who is sharing, set aside distractions, what is said in the circle is confidential.
* **Seating -** Move chairs into a circle so that everyone can see one another, and everyone is on the same level.

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| **CIRCLE PROCESS** | |
| **Opening**  (2-5 min.) | * Welcome everyone to the circle. * Set a positive tone and help the group transition from what they were doing before the circle began. **For example**, a simple moment of silence, a breathing exercise, a short mindfulness activity, or read a relevant quote and give a moment for quiet reflection. * Introduce the purpose of the circle and the circle process for those new to the circle:   + The circle facilitator will ask a question that everyone will have the opportunity to answer   + The talking piece will go around in the circle to the left or right (not across)   + Everyone has a chance to speak, yet can always choose to pass when the talking piece comes to them   + Only the person with talking piece speaks; everyone else listens   + Everyone should speak to the center of the circle, not toward the circle facilitator or another individual |
| **Shared agreements**  (2 min. if review, 10 min. if this is the first time) | * Review the group’s shared agreements for how to “be” in circle.   + **If you have already developed these agreements**, briefly revisit them and say something like:  *Is there anything we should add or change about these agreements?*   *If you are still in agreement with this list, give a thumbs up.*   * + **If you have not yet developed agreements**, take the time to do that now. Write down the group’s responses these questions:   *What do you need to feel comfortable being authentic and honest with this group?*  *What do you need to be able to focus fully on what others are saying?*  *What should we all do to ensure everyone feels welcome and valued?*  *What should we all do to ensure everyone has the opportunity to share?* |
| **Check-in**  (Length will vary – if needed, suggest limiting response to 1-2 sentences) | * Invite participants to express how they are feeling (physically, mentally, or emotionally) at the moment so that others can support, be aware and engage sensitively. If it’s helpful, share a range of words or pictures the group can choose from to express how they are feeling. Pass the talking piece to allow each participant to respond. |
| **Discussion**  (Length will vary based on group dynamics and time available) | * Pose a question or prompt about SEL that allows each person to share their perspective or experience. There are sample questions on the next page to get you started. * Prepare more prompts than you expect you’ll have time for and prioritize them so that you can be flexible if group members have more or less to say. |
| **Check Out** (Length will vary – if needed, suggest limiting response to 1-2 sentences) | * Invite each group member to share one more thought about what they have gained from the circle discussion. **For example**,   + *What’s something you heard today that really made you think?*   + *What did you hear today that you’re going to take with you and apply?*   + *How have your feelings or thoughts shifted from the beginning to the end of this circle?* |
| **Closing** (2 min.) | * Acknowledge what took place during the circle with a forward-thinking, thoughtful message that summarizes key points and promotes a sense of belonging. * Help the group transition to the next part of their day by formally closing the circle in a routine way. **For example**, a simple moment of silence, a breathing exercise, read a quote, and/or spend some time socializing over refreshments. |

**Sample questions**

For the main discussion during your circle, choose prompts that match your group’s context and priorities. Consider the level of trust that the group has built up over time and prepare prompts that your group is ready to answer honestly. Also consider the group’s experience level and prepare prompts that your group will likely be able to respond to easily and without clarifying questions.

Some general prompts are listed below to get you started.

* *The five SEL competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In the past week, when did you find yourself relying on one of these competencies?*
* *When did you find it challenging to model strong social and emotional skills?*
* *How have you seen kids using social and emotional skills? How are you helping create those opportunities?*
* *When did you see others “at their best” in the past week? What was it about the setting and interactions that helped them be at their best?*
* *What is top of mind right now for you when you think about (your classroom, your mentee, your child, etc.)?*
* *What is most exciting to you right now when you think about (your classroom, your mentee, your child, etc.)?*
* *How has SEL helped you move toward your goals (with your class, your mentee, your child, etc.), or how could it help?*
* *What do you think is going well so far with how we are using SEL?*
* *What obstacles have come up so far with how we are using SEL?*
* *Which of the* [*10 indicators of schoolwide SEL*](https://schoolguide.casel.org/what-is-sel/indicators-of-schoolwide-sel/) *is showing up most in our school community now? Where do you see it?*
* *Which of the 10 indicators stands out as a top priority for our school community now? Why?*
* *What would be important to focus on to move this forward?*
* *What would support us to move further in the direction we need to go?*