

Community-Building Restorative Circles

Community-building restorative circles are a **relationship-building** and **support services** strategy that can be used proactively to build relationships and school community, respond to problems and conflict, and teach social–emotional learning skills such as listening, respecting others, and problem solving (Schott Foundation, 2014). Proactive community-building restorative circles are a Tier I component of a schoolwide restorative practices system where participants are invited to respond to community-building prompts and questions. Key elements of community-building restorative circles typically include discussing circle agreements, using a talking piece, and responding to check-in questions, community building questions, and a check-out question (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2016).

Evidence base

Proactive community-building restorative circles focused on student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships can improve student behavioral and academic outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2023). An evaluation of the Circle Forward restorative circles program in Boston Public Schools found that the program had a positive effect on student attendance (Jarjoura et al., 2023). A study of a restorative practices program in Pittsburg Public Schools, which included community-building circles, found significant reductions in student suspensions and improved school climate perceptions (Augustine et al., 2018). Similarly, an evaluation of a restorative practices program in Oakland Unified School District found that implementation of the program was associated with improved attendance and reading achievement and decreases in suspensions and discipline incidents (Jain et al., 2014). The evaluation highlighted the role of community-building restorative circles in promoting responsibility and conflict resolution skills among students. Other research has found that restorative practice programs that incorporate community-building restorative circles are associated with decreases in aggressive behaviors and increases in prosocial behaviors (Gregory et al., 2016).



Implementation resources and considerations

Summarized below is guidance to consider when planning and implementing restorative circles. Restorative circles typically include five elements (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2016):

1. **The circle.** Sitting in a circle allows participants to see each other and supports open and direct communication. An important symbol of community across many cultures, a circle also makes it easier to share the talking piece.
2. **Talking piece.** The person holding the talking piece is the circle member who has the right to speak. It serves to slow down dialogue and ensure that the speaker has the undivided attention of other circle members. The talking piece can be passed to another member, moved around the circle, or placed in the middle after the speaker is done.
3. **Circle guidelines.** The circle guidelines are non-negotiable expectations (i.e., ground rules) established by the circle leader. The guidelines should be designed to meet the needs of a particular group, but *Restorative Resources* (Restorative Resources, 2015) recommends the following:
 - a. **Respect the talking piece.** The circle acknowledges that the talking piece holder is the only one who has the right to speak.
 - b. **Listen from the heart.** Listen openly, attentively, and without judgment. Members do not need to agree with the talker, but they should listen to understand and respect the speaker's perspective.
 - c. **Speak from the heart.** Speakers are encouraged to tell their own story from the perspective of their own truth and experience.
 - d. **Trust the process.** Circle members are encouraged to be vulnerable and genuine and to trust that the community established by the circle will be accepting and non-judgmental.
 - e. **Say just enough.** Speakers are encouraged to monitor their talking time and ensure that other members have equal opportunity to share.
4. **Circle agreements.** Circle agreements are a set of commitments collaboratively established, and revisited regularly, by the circle members. Circle agreements are particularly important for circles that meet regularly and define participation and communication expectations. The agreements should address what circle members need to feel safe and respected.
5. **Circle rhythm.** Circles should have a predictable rhythm and structure. Most restorative circle models include versions of the key elements.

The following resources provide additional community-building restorative circles implementation guidance:

- [Restorative Circles in Schools: Building Community and Enhancing Learning](#)
- [Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community](#)
- [Restorative Circle Questions](#)
- [School-Wide Restorative Practices: Step by Step](#)

This handout summarizes the evidence-base and implementation considerations for community-building restorative circles, a trauma-engaged practice from the [Transforming Schools: Trauma-Engaged Toolkit](#). Leadership teams from Alaska Alternative School Coalition schools can use these evidence briefs to make decisions about which trauma-engaged practice to field test.

References

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