



## **Implementing Restorative Justice & Solution-Focused Peace Circles for Elementary Classrooms**

### **Restorative justice background**

Restorative Justice (RJ) has ancient roots going back centuries and has been practiced by indigenous cultures since then. Westerners stopped using it around 1000 years ago after the Norman Conquest when the Kings took over personal conflict management between individuals and groups. Today the government has assumed control of conflicts through the mainstream justice system. In the 1970s there was a renewed interest for a more “common sense” approach in dealing with crime and social injustice. The value for restoring relationships and repairing damage after wrongdoing occurred was recognized, and in the past 40 years the modern RJ movement has taken hold and has developed into a solid field and movement.

Today RJ is recognized for having both philosophy and practices. The philosophy is basically that positive values drive human interactions, everyone is entitled to participate in discussions about wrongdoing and social injustice, and healing should be the most important outcome when someone is harmed. RJ practices are based on this philosophy. This does not mean that bad behavior should be ignored, but that we should first show care and concern for healing instead of focusing mainly on punishment and blame for wrongdoers.

The most respected American, and one of the world’s greatest, RJ experts is Howard Zehr whose seminal book *Changing Lenses* describes RJ philosophy and its practices.

Zehr says RJ’s “guiding questions” are:

1. Who has been hurt?
2. What are their needs?
3. Whose obligations are these?
4. Who has a stake in this situation?
5. What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to put things right? (p. 38, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, Howard Zehr).

### **Introducing solution-focused peace circles to an elementary class**

Elementary school in the United States is typically for children aged 5 through

12 years.

To introduce peace circle is an elementary class, begin by asking students to sit in a circle with no barriers between them blocking their views of each other. You are going to show them what a peacemaking circle is and at the same time explain it to them.

### **Beginning the peace circle**

Tell the students: "We are having a *Solution-Focused Peace Circle* to talk about how we can all get along better and be happier together in our classroom."

Tell the students: "We will go around the circle and everyone will have chances to speak. And we will have some simple rules to make the circle work well."

First, tell the students how much time you have for the circle: "We have 30 minutes for our circle. There are 20 of us in the class. It is important each of us has the chance to speak. Sometimes it is hard to remember time so when I point to my watch that means you need to wrap up speaking so the next person can speak."

Second, ask: "Can everyone agree to speak one at a time? Even if you have something very important to say, can you wait until we come to you in the circle?"

Make sure you look at each child shaking your head up and down indicating yes, and listen for them to say yes. You want them to nod their heads back to you in agreement they won't interrupt and will wait their turn to speak.

### **Some Native North Americans use a *talking stick* to ensure only one person speaks at a time in circles.**

A talking piece can be anything, a stick, rock, etc., and whoever holds it is the only one to speak. It is passed around the circle as each child speaks. Tell them: "For our first few circles, I will be the circle facilitator. After you all learn how circles operate we will take turns and you can be the circle facilitator. Sometimes I will need to speak out of order, but I will usually only speak when it is my turn too."

It is important to share the facilitation duties even with the students you think

may be unruly. Having these children especially selected to be the circle facilitator will help them learn to focus and control their behavior. They will model the behavior you want them to have.

A classroom could collectively make a talking piece to use in their peace circles—students could decorate a stick with strings and paint, etc. Below is a photo of a talking stick given to Theo Gavrielides, which he is holding, on his birthday in Greece that a group of us made for him.



### **Conflict is normal for people and should be expected**

Next explain to the students: "It is normal to have conflict, which is what happens when we have a problem with each other. We all suffer from problems sometimes. We all have different needs at different times. Maybe I am cold one day. I need the window to our classroom closed to help keep me warm, but Billy here is hot and he needs the window open to help keep him cool. Billy and I could have a conflict about that because we have different needs at the same time."

### **Conflicts can lead to creativity and better relationships**

Good organizations know that conflict can be positive and lead to strengthening relationships. Conflict leads to creatively and stronger people and organization.

*It is simply how conflicts are dealt with that determines their usefulness for building better relationships and their value to create more meaningful lives.*

If you shun and avoid conflict please examine your feelings about conflict.

Often our families teach us it is wrong and bad to engage in conflicts. Some families simply do not discuss differences of opinion, conflicts or anything that is "not nice."

If you have aversion and very negative feelings about conflict, please work on feeling whatever it is that you are feeling. Be brave and do not allow yourself to ignore conflict because it is uncomfortable or you feel afraid or fearful about it. It is better to accept, and to teach youth, that conflict happens and we need to put our energy into finding solutions rather than ignoring or avoiding conflicts.

The work you put into discussing conflicts with others, and examining it for yourself, can strengthen you and the people you work and live with. Conflict can lead to resiliency and happier relationships.

### **Solution-focused peace circles purpose**

Say to the students: "Our Peace Circle will be to help us find ways to meet all our needs."

"Let's begin our circle today with what is good and what we especially like about our class."

### **Beginning the solution-focused peace circle**

The teacher should begin by telling the students what you especially like about them, e.g., "You are kind and very hard workers." Think of an example of something especially kind they did or hard work they did and tell that story, e.g., "This class is full of nice children. You share your books," etc.,....

Tell the class that they never have to speak if they don't want to. You want to always respect each child, have voluntary participation, and allow anyone to pass who does not wish to speak in a circle discussion.

Next ask the child sitting either right or left of you to: "Please share what you

like about the other people in the class.”

Go around the allowing each child to say something positive. Sometime children will say what they don't like. Ask them “What do you like?”

### **Circles to maintain peace in the class**

For classes that are getting along well and not suffering any conflicts you can ask students: ‘This is such a good class. We rarely have conflicts. What can we do to make sure we continue having this kind of a peaceful class?’

Go around asking each child and respecting any who wants to pass.

Collect all the ideas. You can discuss each ideas as each child makes it in the circle, e.g., Hazel wants us to keep sharing our pencils and papers for students who do not have them. Does everyone agree this is a good idea?

When the whole group agrees, say: “Okay we will continue sharing.”

### **For a generally minor conflicts typically occurring within the class, e.g.**

loud talking, late homework or no homework, etc. If you have a conflict, after each child has had the chance to speak in the circle and it comes back to your turn, state what the problem is: e.g. Loud talking during reading time, students not doing homework, whatever it is share it with the children in the circle.

Ask: ‘What are ideas do you each have about how we can have a quiet reading time?’ “How can we make sure everyone is safe and we use our words and not fists?” “How can we all make sure we do our home work?” Let them share whatever they think. Ask each child again in the circle. As the suggestions are made it is helpful to have students writing down the suggestions or you write them down.

As suggestions are made you can ask the rest of the class what they think of it? You want to get the class's consensus and have everyone agree on solutions.

If you have time you can go around again and ask what ideas they especially like and want to try in the class. If you don't have time, ask them to think about what they want to do and you will continue discussion on it.

**How often should solution-focused peace circles be held in an elementary class?**

It would best to have a peace circle everyday or every few days to check in that everyone is getting along. Or you could have them weekly and last choice is to have them when there are conflicts. Having a regular peacemaking circle will

help prevent conflicts and keep students cooperative and it will also teach them the skills they need for managing conflicts when it does arise. I suggest having a daily and first thing in the morning, which is what Maria Montessori taught and we did in Montessori school (below photo of a 1900 Montessori circle).



**Process for specific incidents of wrongdoing**, e.g., Billy was hit by Sally. Ask Sally and Billy to both sit next to each other one your right and one on your left.

This is a good opportunity to teach students the difference between feelings and thoughts. To apply RJ to specific incidents we use

First, complement Sally and Billy for wanting to sit in the peace circle and find a way to make things right. Say: "Wow! It is great you want to make things right. It



is great Sally you take responsibility for your actions and that you are willing to listen and find how Sally can repair any harm Billy!

Next ask Sally: "How do you think Billy felt when you hit him?" Ask her: "What were your thoughts when you hit Billy?"

Then ask Billy how he felt and what he thought?

Then go around the classroom and ask each child to say how they felt when Sally hit Billy, and what they thought.

Next ask Billy what would he would like Sally to do to repair the harm?

Repeat whatever Billy says and ask Sally if that is something she can do?

After finding something Sally can do for Billy, maybe it is simply an apology, close the circle.

### **Closing the solution-focused peace circle**

Tell the class. "We have had a useful circle, and now we will each say something to close our circle with complements."

Go to each child beginning on the side Billy is sitting on and ask them to complement anyone in the circle for anything they learned about them in the circle you just had or on anything they want to complaint the whole class on. If they have difficulty understanding what a complement is, you can begin by saying one yourself: "I complement all of you here today for working hard to sit quietly and speaking when it was your turn. You showed discipline and focus. Great work class! I am looking forward to our next peace circle!"

### **For more serious and specific incidents of harm**

If the conflict you have is a more serious incident of harm, you can look at the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) script for facilitating RJ circles for more questions and a more complex circle. The script may be found and downloaded from: <https://www.iirp.edu/eforum-archive/4434-restorative-conference-facilitator-script>



**For more circle resources please see:**

*Interviewing for Solutions*, Peter De Jong & Insoo Kim Berg, 2013

*Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*, Carolyn Boyes-Watson & Kay Pranis, 2015

**Special note and thank you to teachers**

If you are an educator and use these suggestions, we would appreciate any feedback from you on how it went and any recommendations you might have for how we can improve them for others.

Thank you to Melissa Shapel Hansen a wonderful teacher, mother, and daughter in Washington state. You are a courageous hero who has been a role model and taught many the value and meaning of restorative justice.

BIG thank you too to Melissa, and all of you teachers, who continually look for ways to improve your classroom management skills. We need more teachers like you who see learning as a life long endeavor.

Please let us know anytime we can be of assistance in your journey.

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