

Peacemaking Circles

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One of the common Restorative practices is the Peacemaking Circle. Peacemaking Circles are an extremely effective way to achieve the Restorative Justice goals of healing, accountability and community strengthening. All of those goals move us toward safer, healthier communities.

The Peacemaking Circle is a structured dialog process that allows every participant an opportunity to speak and encourages attentive listening and truth-telling. The Circle is an intentional space carefully designed to help all participants step in the direction of their best self from wherever they are.

Participants sit in a Circle, usually without a table. The Circle begins with some form of opening to help participants be fully present and to set the tone for respectful conversation. An object called a talking piece is passed around the Circle from person to person providing every participant the chance to speak. Only the person with the talking piece speaks. Consequently, whoever has the talking piece may speak without interruptions or push back. The Circle technique allows full expression of thoughts and emotions which is necessary for a more complete understanding of the issue under discussion.

In the Circle, a discussion of values precedes the discussion of the purpose of the Circle. The values discussion focuses on the values that represent our best self. When we focus first on what it means to be our best self, the ensuing conversation is more honest, respectful and productive.

The facilitator or keeper of the Circle guides the dialog with prompting questions or topics to assist the Circle in creating a safe space for honest dialog and then helping participants explore the topic of the circle. The keeper is not a 'fixer' or an expert. In a Circle, all voices are equal; all input is valued.

Circles have been used in many settings including:

- deciding sentences and dispositions for adult and juvenile offenders
- support and healing for victims of crime
- supporting juvenile offenders in taking responsibility and changing their lifestyle
- increasing the safety of children in their home
- building relationships in the classroom
- group planning and decisionmaking

In schools, the use of Circles has reduced the number of office referrals for behavioral problems and the number of suspensions and expulsions. In workplaces, the use of Circles has improved morale and improved staff retention.