Introduction to Connection Circles

Welcome!
We are glad you are here.

Center for Community Dialogue & Training
www.ourfamilyservices.org/center

Today’s Content
• Introduction
• What is a Connection Circle
• Research Basis
• Summary of Research Findings
• Keys to Successful Implementation

Your facilitator....

Chris Medvescek
Introduction to Connection Circles

About us

Our Family is a non-government 501(c)(3) organization that since 1953 has served special needs populations in Southern Arizona, including youth and families who are homeless, and youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. For more than 35 years, Our Family has provided conflict resolution services and education through the Center for Community Dialogue and Training.

The Center provides community mediation, communication and ADR training, community forums, and structured Circle-based dialogue reaching more than 1,500 individuals annually.

Funder Acknowledgment

Connection Circles are a project of the Center for Community Dialogue, a program of Our Family Services.

The project is funded by the ACR/JAMS Foundation Initiative for Students and Youth.

What is a Connection Circle?

- Safe
- Accepting
- Welcoming
- Respectful
Introduction to Connection Circles

Dialogue Circles Model

- Structured conversation using a talking piece
- Voluntary Participation
- All voices are heard
- No overt effort to teach
- Neutral facilitator

Neutral Facilitator

- Trained in the art of neutral facilitation.
- Does not teach or correct participants.
- Follows a “script” of open-ended questions and reflections on communication and conflict resolution topics.
- Ensures a safe and respectful environment

Focused on Communication & Conflict Resolution Skills for Youth

- An innovative way to help youth learn and practice communication and conflict resolution skills.
- For youth ages 14-24, including vulnerable and structurally disadvantaged youth
Encourages Connection to Personal Experience

- Offer youth a chance to share what they already know about conflict.
- Participants connect topics to their own lives and opinions, and hear from others.
- Participants connect their experiences, feelings and actions to communication terms and concepts.

Provides Connection to Others

- Youth and staff engage in safe, meaningful, nonjudgmental conversations about important topics they would not normally discuss.
- Youth and staff gain empathy for other Circle participants.
- Youth and staff actively practice respectful speaking and listening.

Where are Connection Circles Used?

**Long-Term Programs**
- Ongoing, consistent
- Classrooms & after-school programs
- Youth shelters and residential facilities
- Youth groups and clubs
- Drop-in youth programs

**Short-Term Programs**
- Limited time period or single use
- Youth discussions of critical issues
- Youth clubs, boards, councils
- Student conferences
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Personal Interaction
Missing on a Daily Level

"[Circles] give us a chance and an excuse to be able to talk to the kids. If I say 'hey, let's sit down and have a talk, the kids would see it as weird or am I in trouble?' But if we all sit down in Connection Circle, it's not that strange and gives us a chance to get to know the kids better."

(Site staff)

Value of Offering
Consistent Programming

"Don't downplay the value of consistency. It's good to have a routine when you're coming from terrible places. It's very valuable to staff to maintain a sort of normalcy."

(Site staff)

Youth Bond with Each Other

"Kids bond during the Circle. There have been times when we have had emotional Circles where some kids were close to tears because some of the Circles have resulted in stories of others that they did not know. They talk about it afterward, even the following week. There were a couple of kids who became good friends after the Circle because 'You've been through what I've been through.'"

(Site staff)
Circles Offer Youth a Release

"Sometimes the kids just use the talking piece to vent about a certain frustration, then try to shape it so it fits the topic as much as it can. They use that time to vent."

"The topic was effective and meaningful to this small group. Students were opening up and sharing. Saw friendships starting."

(Circle facilitators)

Youth Speaking Their Experience

"[Connection Circle] helps us understand each other a bit better. In turn, it helps us end any arguments or disagreements we have."

"I noticed that others don’t want to show empathy but I know inside its there and its there they just think its weakness and worthless. But I noticed I showed it quite a bit ... and I’m proud I NOTICED I did cause I probably would not."

(Youth journal pages)

Youth Speaking Their Experience

"When a person feels like they are being talked about, they become sensitive & that almost always leads to a misunderstanding. If at times like this people just got in a circle I think the problems would be fixed faster."

"There was a time when my sister was home all day and didn’t clean and I was told to clean when I got home from school and work. This problem could have been solved with a Connection Circle because I could have voiced my opinion and we could’ve found a solution."

(Youth journal pages)
Research Basis of Connection Circles

- Conflict resolution is most effectively learned when the learners are able to participate as equals
- Youth respond better to conflict resolution education when they have agency and when they share authority

(Student Conflict Resolution, Power "Sharing" in Schools and Citizenship Education
Kathy Bickmore, Curriculum Inquiry, April 2003
Connecticut Department of Education)

Research Basis

- Participation in a safe, respectful, accepting dialogue process (regardless of topic) strengthens communication skills.

(Conflict Resolution Education: A Guide to Implementing Programs in Schools, Youth-Serving Organizations, and Community and Juvenile Justice Settings
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention USDJ, 1996)

Research Basis

- Analogical reasoning (e.g., linking subject matter to personal experience) is a highly effective way to learn conflict resolution skills.

(Gick and Holyoak, 1983)

- The format of the Circle naturally breaks down barriers and promotes tolerance between participants.

(Contact Theory - Gordon Allport, PhD)
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Research Basis

• Connection Circles are consistent with the ARC Framework for Runaway and Homeless Youth Serving Agencies
  • Attachment
  • Self-Regulation
  • Competency

(Hollywood Youth Partnership)

Program Evaluation

Qualitative Data
• Facilitator logs
• Site Staff logs
• Youth journals (voluntary)
• Staff/facilitator interviews conducted by professional evaluators

Quantitative Data
• Facilitator and staff rankings of program implementation at their sites, gathered by professional evaluators

Youth, site staff and volunteer facilitators found value in the Circles

"I feel like being a guinea pig and showing people it's okay to be open." (youth journal)

"I feel like the topic was very productive. It involved youth asking a lot of questions about the definition of words. Loved it." (staff log)

"Participants were engaged and allowed themselves and each other to be vulnerable." (facilitator log)
Youth understood curriculum topics and recognized this in self and others

“I think active listening means while you’re listening to someone speak, you’re taking into consideration what they’re saying and understanding how they feel.” (youth journal)

“I don’t really express my needs or feelings. But I have noticed that those who do express them … are truly brave.” (youth journal)

“[Holding grudges] ruins one’s mood and is unhealthy. They seem to be bad people to be around.” (youth journal)

Youth practiced positive behaviors

“My best friend shouted at his girl how much of a b word she is and kept throwing insults so I gave him water and talked calmly while slowly backing him away from her.” (youth journal)

 “[The Circle topic] … got them thinking about self-respect and how to improve this. Youth seemed more willing to respect and understand others.” (staff log)

“Students in a classroom Circle later asked to use the Red Card/Green Card exercise (based on Nonviolent Communication principles) so they could talk about a conflict they were having.” (staff verbal report)

Youth practiced positive behaviors

”[The Circle] affects the pace of conversations happening here at the lounge. The introverted youth leave more confident and feel better about their ability to communicate.” (staff log)

“The youth feel, “because we did this [Circle] together, we can talk about this [situation].” (staff)
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Key Implementation Measures

Quantitative results show that sites that received high marks on key implementation measures also received high scores for youth participation in Circles.

Successful Implementation

- Site Commitment
- Dialogue Circle Model
- Skilled neutral facilitators

Successful Implementation

Site Commitment
- Fits with site's overall goals for youth
- Integrated into larger program
- Consistent, place, time, facilitator
- Staff presence as Circle participants (not as neutral facilitator)
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Circle Topics
- Difficult Conversations
- Coping with Awful Situations
- Active Listening
- Opposite of Prejudice
- Empathy
- Identifying Feelings & Needs
- How to Handle Anger
- Grudges and Forgiveness
- Tolerance
- Telling My Truth
- Blame and the Fundamental Error of Attribution
- Unfairness
- Rumors and Gossip
- Compassion and Self Care

Successful Implementation

Successful Implementation

Dialogue Circle Model - Agenda for 1-Hour Circle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gathering</th>
<th>Youth come into the Circle space. Snacks and water are available (optional)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity (optional)</td>
<td>Quick cooperative games and noncompetitive activities often are used as icebreakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreements</td>
<td>Facilitators review Circle Agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- It’s OK to pass</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- This is a no phone zone</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What’s said in the Circle stays in the Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Everyone participates – no observers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answers are up to the participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitators pass talking piece, may share information or lead brief activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td>Optional personal reflection and evaluation tool</td>
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</tbody>
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Connection Circle on Respect

Sample Rounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round 1</th>
<th>Respect is something everybody wants but not everybody feels that they get. How do you define respect? There are no right or wrong answers.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Round 2</td>
<td>Let’s think for a minute about the opposite of respect. Disrespect – or thinking someone is disrespecting you – can cause a lot of conflicts. Have you ever been disrespected? What did the other person do or say that felt disrespectful?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Connection Circles on Respect
Sample Rounds (con’t.)

Round 3  Respect is important to our sense of self-worth.
          Who are the people in your life who act respectfully toward you?
          How do they behave that is respectful?

Round 4  How do you show respect to yourself?

Round 5  What gets in the way of you showing more respect to yourself and others?
          What stops you from being respectful?

Round 6  What is one thing you can do to show more respect to yourself and others?

Getting Started

• Review the components of Site Commitment. Without site commitment, it is difficult to sustain an ongoing, well-attended program
• Take Facilitator Training (online, on-demand, no charge)
• Obtain the Connection Circles manual (downloadable, free).
  The manual contains:
  • Implementation guidelines
  • Circle scripts
  • The Red Card/Green Card exercise
  • Youth journal pages for each topic
  • Other support materials

Contact Information

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