

Peacemaking Circle Process

Peacemaking circles provide a process for bringing people together as equals to talk about very difficult issues and painful experiences in an atmosphere of respect and concern for everyone. Peacemaking circles create a space in which all people, regardless of their role, can reach out to one another as equals and recognize their mutual interdependence in the struggle to live in a good way and to help one another through the difficult spots in life.

Peacemaking circles are built on the tradition of talking circles, common among indigenous people of North America, in which a talking piece, passed from person to person consecutively around the circle, regulates the dialog. The person holding the talking piece has the undivided attention of everyone else in the circle and can speak without interruption. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, deeper listening, thoughtful reflection, and an unrushed pace. Additionally, the talking piece creates space for people who find it difficult to speak in a group. Drawing on both traditional wisdom and contemporary knowledge, the circle process also incorporates elements of modern peacemaking and consensus building processes.

Participants are seated in a circle of chairs with no tables. Sometimes objects with meaning to the group are placed in the center as a focal point to remind participants of shared values and common ground. The physical format of the circle symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection and inclusion. It also promotes focus, accountability and participation from all.

The circle process typically involves four stages:

- Acceptance – The community and the immediately affected parties determine whether the circle process is appropriate for the situation.
- Preparation – Separate circles for various interests (family, social workers) are held to explore issues and concerns and prepare all parties to participate effectively. Thorough preparation is critical to the overall effectiveness of the circle process. Preparation includes identifying possible supporters in the natural network of the family to participate in the process.
- Gathering – All parties are brought together to express feelings and concerns and to develop mutually acceptable solutions to issues identified.
- Follow-up – Regular communication and check-ins are used to assess progress and adjust agreements as conditions change.

At any stage multiple circles may be held to complete the tasks of that stage.

Circles are facilitated by keepers who are responsible for setting a tone of respect and hope that supports and honors every participant. All circles are guided by the following commitments participants make to one another:

- What comes out in circle, stays in circle – personal information shared in circle is kept confidential except when safety would be compromised.
- Speak with respect – speak only when you have the talking piece; speak in a good way about good and difficult feelings; leave time for others to speak.

- Listen with respect – actively listen with your heart and body.
- Stay in circle – respect for circle calls upon people to stay in the circle while the circle works to find resolution to issues raised.

Additional guidelines may be created by circle participants to meet the needs of that situation. Guidelines institute a covenant defining how people will interact and share space and time as a group.

Circles consciously engage all aspects of human experience - spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. Ceremony and ritual are used in the opening and closing of a circle to mark the space of circle as a sacred space in which participants will be present with one another in a different way than in an ordinary meeting.

While the design, procedures and participants vary greatly from one circle to another, there are some fundamental principles common to all circles.

Practices and principles common to all circles:

Participants

- 1) Act on personal values
- 2) Direct participation
- 3) Voluntary involvement
- 4) Respect for all and all things
- 5) Self design
- 6) Equal opportunity to participate
- 7) Shared vision

Process

- 1) Inclusive of all interests
- 2) Easily accessible to all
- 3) Flexible to accommodate each case
- 4) Holistic approach
- 5) Spiritual experiences respected
- 6) Consensus outcomes
- 7) Accountability to others and to process

In the circle process social institutions play important roles, but the process is centered on the community context of the situation. The circle throws a wide net to capture possible points of support or assistance and to gather all relevant knowledge. Potential contributions are expected even from those who are part of the problem. Multiple issues are dealt with at once. Circles recognize that the issues interact with one another and cannot be effectively dealt with in isolation. Circles promote mutual responsibility, the recognition that individual well being depends upon the well being of all.

Excerpted from: “ Establishing shared responsibility for child welfare through peacemaking circles” by Kay Pranis and Barry Stuart in Family Group Conferences, edited by Burford and Hudson