

Restorative Circles

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This Info Sheet is aimed at anyone who delivers or is looking to provide a restorative approach. A Restorative Circle is a versatile restorative practice that can be used reactively, to respond to behaviour, conflicts and problems but also proactively, to build communities and develop relationships. It brings together in dialogue those who are responsible, those directly affected and the wider community, with the three parties as equals. Circles give people an opportunity to speak and importantly to listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, respect and equality. There are a number of different forms that a Restorative Circle can take although all will adopt shared power, mutual understanding and agreed action. Restorative Circles can be used as an alternative to other meeting types that can rely on hierarchy, like those with a formal Chair.

Benefits of Restorative Circles

There are many benefits of Restorative Circles in dealing with conflicts. Firstly the process is designed to encourage individuals to speak less and therefore listen more (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). It also allows individuals present to have equal opportunity to speak and have their say and maximises the opportunity for individuals who are quieter to have their voices heard without being dominated by those who may be louder and more assertive. Finally the [International Institute for Restorative Practices](#) highlights that the use of restorative practices including restorative circles helps to:

- Reduce crime, violence and bullying
- Improve human behaviour
- Strengthen civil society
- Provide effective leadership
- Restore relationship
- Repair harm.

Sequential Circles

Sequential Circles allow people the opportunity to have their say and offer their own perspectives by using a sequential format (Pranis, 2005). All participants will seat themselves in a circle around the room and individuals speak one at a time with the opportunity moving around the circle in one direction. To ensure that only one person speaks at a time, a “talking piece” is often used (Costello et al., 2010). This is a hand-held object which is passed from person to person when it is their opportunity to speak.

A sequential circle can be used effectively when dealing with conflicts and working with groups of children and young people e.g. within schools and group living environments such as residential homes, secure establishments and custody. There is no recommended upper or lower participant number for a sequential circle.

Non- sequential circle

A non-sequential circle adheres to the principles of Restorative Circles although applies a different fixed order. In the non-sequential circle the facilitator supports the order of speaker allowing each person to speak in turn. In effect, the facilitator is the talking piece in a

non-sequential circle ensuring safety, respect and equality throughout. After everyone has had the opportunity to express their views, the facilitator moves to a more open, back-and-forth, non-ordered discussion. This differs from a chaired meeting as it encourages more discussion and input from all parties present. Non-sequential circles are used during a Restorative Justice Conference although will use a more structured format. For more information on conferencing see [Section 13](#) of CYCJ's practice guidance.

Fishbowl

Another Restorative Circle format is the fishbowl. This consists of a group of active participants in a sequential or non-sequential inner circle, surrounded by observers arranged in an outer circle, or circles dependent on the group size. This format allows for circles where there are a large number of participants and observers involved. Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, (2010) describe a variation of the fishbowl format which allows a limited amount of participation by the observers in the outer circle(s). This involves having an empty chair in the inner circle that allows observers to come forward one at a time, sit in the empty chair, say something and then return to the outer circle.

The fishbowl approach may be used in schools where there are particularly large numbers of participants and observers that have been impacted by an incident in the school.

Restorative Circle Process

Evanovich, Martinez, Kern, and Haynes (2019) advocate for a four step circle process as it provides an easily implemented and replicated structure. These steps can be used in any of the above circle formats. The four steps are:

Greeting/ focusing moment: This is used to set a positive tone for the circle and although a short section of the Restorative Circle, it is an important one. A greeting could involve everyone introducing themselves and icebreaker games. Alternatively, a focusing moment involves participants taking part on an individual level e.g. via a deep breathing exercise. The choice of greeting/focusing moment will be determined by the size and make-up of the group involved.

Feelings check-in: This is used to allow the facilitator to gauge the emotional status of each participant allowing them to adapt, modify and sometimes terminate the circle as appropriate. An example of a feeling check in is using a simple thumbs up/down exercise.

Activity: The activity is the largest section of a Restorative Circle. There should be a clear purpose for the activity section, the reason why you are conducting the Restorative Circle in the first place.

Closing: The closing section is used as an ending to the Restorative Circle. The focusing moment that was conducted at the beginning may be used again or similarly the feelings check in will allow the facilitator to assess the emotional status of the participants as they get ready to leave. The closing section may also be used to reflect on the Restorative Circle including what went well, what participants have learned and what actions they may need to do moving forward. It is important that the closing section symbolises a distinct close and participants are aware of any directions for future activities or directions.

References

- Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. (2010). Restorative circles in schools: Building community and enhancing learning. Bethlehem: International Institute for Restorative Practices.
- Evanovich, L., Martinez, S., Kern, L., & Haynes, R. D. (2019). Proactive Circles: A practical guide to the implementation of a restorative practice. Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 64(1), 28-36.
- Pranis, K. (2005). The Little Book of Circle Processes. PA: Good Books.