

Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

YOU Can Make Circle Time Developmentally Appropriate

by Karen Stephens



Circle time. It has a time slot in every classroom schedule. It's one of the unspoken rules of early childhood curriculum planning: "Thou shalt have circle time, whether the children enjoy it or not!"

Gathering a gaggle of children and holding their attention is a challenging — even intimidating — endeavor. (Ask any first year teacher!) Until teachers become skilled in planning and conducting developmentally appropriate large group activities, circle time can be torturous for kids and teachers alike. Children are "timed out" every few minutes, teachers grit and grind their teeth between huffs and puffs of frustration, stories are repeatedly interrupted so the child who gradually edged off her carpet and onto her neighbor's can be soundly chastised, "Angela, where does your body belong?" . . . I wonder if our Angelas ever silently say to themselves, "Anywhere but here."

But when it works, circle time can be a teacher's crowning glory; I mean a real joy! I've seen it work for others; and I've experienced it myself. The key to a successful circle time is a motivated, creative teacher who understands developmentally appropriate guidance and curriculum. Now that sounds simple, doesn't it? But, like all things worth achieving, it's not.

It takes experience (years!) to become an accomplished "circle time teacher." Teachers must understand the *science* of child development as well as master the *art* of

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nurturing that development. Knowledge of typical (and atypical) development, developmental variations, and unique rates and styles of learning must be acquired. Only then can the teacher develop her individual *artful* approach to circle time.

Wise teachers trust and respect children's innate drive to learn. They capitalize on children's curiosity and unending fascination with the world. Children's needs and interests, not lesson plans written in stone, are the driving force behind successful circle times.

Teachers also need courage and self-confidence to implement motivating, interesting circle times. All the lesson plans in the world are worthless if a teacher can't capture and maintain children's interest.

To benefit from activities, children must first be enticed. There are many ways teachers do this. They use facial expressions and gestures, they laugh, smile, and express empathy. They use props and creative approaches. Circle time is a talent that can be cultivated, just as one learns to perform using magic tricks or storytelling.

Circle times are not for the withdrawn or the faint of heart. They require the ability to alternate between the bold and dramatic presentation and yet, within a beat, shift to letting children guide the focus of learning by asking well selected questions. Circle time requires seriousness, but also the ability to be whimsical and humorous. None of those traits are acquired without taking the very public risk of teaching (and learning) through trial and error. That's why non-judgmental feedback and assistance from co-workers is so important! Fear of failure is the biggest cause for circle times becoming boring, repetitive, and stagnant rather than creative, ever evolving learning adventures.

Conducting successful circle times can't be learned from books, lectures, videos, or observations alone. Only through actual daily experience can teachers develop a personal flair for engaging children meaningfully in group experiences. It takes sensitivity, intuition, and the willingness to fall on your face and then to get back up and try, try again. Leading a group of 20 children in an activity is one of the bravest things in the world to attempt! (I wonder how many corporate CEOs could do it.)

Becoming a master of circle times is worth the time and effort it takes to accomplish. There are so many benefits! Children and teachers form close relationships through familiar transitions, rituals, and activities. Children gain confidence as they express themselves through discussions. They learn to respect and enjoy (not simply

tolerate!) viewpoints of peers and teachers. Listening and concentration skills are enhanced. Children learn basic guidelines for courteous, social behavior. Indeed, circle time is children's training ground for good citizen involvement — a most important trait in a democratic society such as ours!

Now that you agree circle time is a valuable teaching strategy, let's turn to practical tips for ensuring success. Follow the guidelines below and you'll offer children a circle time that is not only developmentally appropriate, but also worthy of the time it's allotted in your students' daily schedule . . . and their all-too-fleeting childhood.

Base circle time activities on observations of children's play and conversations.

Attentively observe free play. Note children's abilities and interests during spontaneous, self-initiated, peer interactions. Then follow the children's lead when planning circle time activities! Plan experiences that are responsive to children's general ages as well as unique developmental abilities. Circle activities should be an outgrowth of individual or group interests, not an arbitrarily selected curriculum resource book.

Set the stage for appropriate behavior.

Create comfortable seating to help children pay attention. Kids like the floor best, so have circle time on a carpet or rug. Circles created with tape on the floor, or carpet squares, help children define personal boundaries, and guide children on where (and how) to sit.

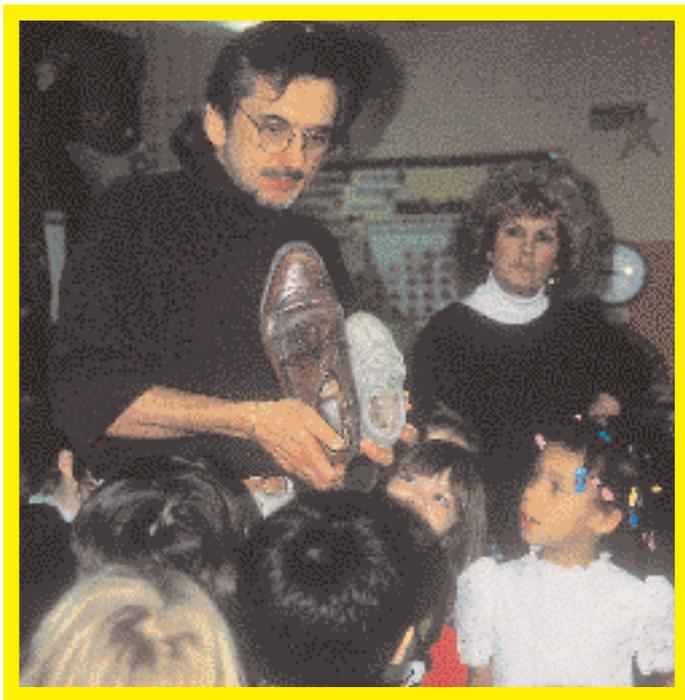
Seat yourself where you can see all children. Visually scan the group to gauge how children are responding to and benefiting from the activity.

Make sure all children can see you, your props, and the activity materials. Big books stands and presentation easels are "audience-friendly" when reading picture books, telling flannel board stories, or using puppets. (And, yes, even though you do this, at the beginning of group it's wise to remind kids to sit on their bottoms so everyone can see.)

Anticipate and prevent distractions. Circle time should be away from high traffic areas (such as the classroom entrance) or where people gather for conversation (such as near the kitchen). Class pets can be a distraction, too.

Encourage distractible children to sit near you for better concentration. A teacher's aide should sit beside or between children who find it hard to focus in a larger group.





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Take advantage of children's love of and need for rituals and routine.

Select a regular method of alerting children to circle time. Teachers use all kinds of verbal and non-verbal cues. Cues range from tickling piano keys, ringing chimes, flickering lights, to singing welcome songs.

Consistently used, any cue becomes a ritual to help children get into the "mood" for group time. Rituals for beginning and ending of circle time go a long way in giving children a sense of stability, familiarity, and predictability. That sense of security and control is very important for children's emotional and social well-being.

Plan smooth transition activities to guide children from one activity into the group experience. For instance, if children are coming in from outside, ask them to walk to circle like robots or a favorite animal. As children gradually come to circle, *immediately* begin a preliminary activity, such as a familiar fingerplay, guessing game, or song. Expecting children to just sit and do nothing until everyone arrives at circle is the best way to undermine success.

Work cooperatively with co-teachers and volunteers.

While one teacher is leading circle time, another staff member should sit amongst

the children. (Aides should sit among children, not next to each other.)

Train staff to help children focus when others are talking. Often this simply means putting a hand on a shoulder or knee, or whispering, "Your eyes should be on the book."

Take turns leading circle time with co-workers to ensure a fresh presentation. This also allows children to become better acquainted with all adults.

Clearly communicate expectations for participation.

Involve children in setting guidelines for appropriate circle time behavior (a circle time activity in itself!). State "rules" or limits for behavior positively: "You may sit on your bottom during story time. One person at a time may talk."

Give children clear, simple, sequential directions to follow. Astute teachers give directions one at a time! This applies to explaining how to participate in the activity as well as guiding appropriate behavior.

Use positive behavior management strategies to prevent interruptions. Children are patient and able to focus longer when they are reassured *specifically* that they will get a turn. For instance, state your "conversation lineup" by saying, "I'm going to listen to Chuck first, then I'll listen to Derek and then Kelly." (And then you darn well better do as you said!)

Let children influence circle time experiences.

Engage children in circle time by letting them make some curriculum decisions. For instance, bring two books to circle. Let children vote on which book to read. Voting can be conducted by a show of hands. With younger children, place one book on each side of the circle area. Children then move their body next to the book they would like read. Children count to see which book has more bodies, meaning votes.

Play a game of chance to include children. Write the names of favorite songs on separate cards. Mix cards in a pile and ask a child to select a card. Read the title of the song and sing away! You can use this game to select fingerplays or stories to act out, too.

Be creative in capturing children's attention.

A "focus" object is great for tweaking children's curiosity and interest. For instance, introduce a bird book with an abandoned bird's nest or bird poster. Motivating props



can introduce topics. Adventurous teachers use a wide variety of props, which may include flannel board stories, puppets, musical instruments, nature items, big books, actual tools of different professions or arts, and even special visitors themselves!

Maintain children's enthusiasm for circle time by varying your performance! Use humor, suspense, and surprise liberally. Dare to show your flamboyant side by becoming an actor. Come to circle dressed "in character." Can the children see through your disguise?

When singing, reading, or storytelling, occasionally use an altered voice for novelty. For instance, use an appropriate accent, talk like a Martian, whisper, or even pantomime. In other words, have fun! Silliness adds joy to life, and certainly to circle time!

Create "ambiance" for aesthetic enjoyment. Sort seashells while playing an environmental tape of ocean waves. Put a fish bowl in the middle of the circle to create a seaside mood. When reading books, quietly play background music typical of the culture or setting — for instance, *Fox Song* (Joseph Bruchac, Philomel Books, 1993) read to the lilting backdrop of Native American flute music is absolutely enchanting.

Plan for "learning by doing."

Kids learn best through "hands-on" participation. Lectures on abstract topics, such as how rainbows are made, do not engage children; concrete experiences with prisms or a water hose in the sunshine do!

Whenever possible, give children something to hold or manipulate. For instance, give each child an instrument or noise maker to provide sound effects for favorite stories, i.e. clacking small, medium, and large blocks to represent the Billy Goats Gruff.

Include a variety of curriculum areas for integrated learning.

Plan circle time activities so all curricular areas are covered — from math, science, and language to creative movement, music, and art. Integrate learning across curriculum areas so it's relevant to children's daily lives.

Example: Language charts related to problem solving can help children integrate knowledge and skills. Pose this problem: "You have no money, but want to give your best friend a birthday present. What could you do?" You can then (1) write down the solutions children devise, (2) let them dictate their solution into a tape recorder, or (3) let them draw their solution. Kids will

develop creativity and abstract thinking, as well as expressive language skills all at the same time! (Don't you love it when a plan comes together?)

Set a pace and a rhythm for circle time.

When preparing for circle, plan a beginning, middle, and end. Varied pace holds attention, so balance sitting and listening with active participation.

Transition activities, such as calming fingerplays, songs, and relaxation exercises, are good opening and ending techniques. I've seen many inexperienced teachers lose control of a circle time by "revving up" children and then not knowing how to calm them down again. This spells disaster not only for circle time but for activities that follow!

Completing the circle.

I hope you're convinced that skillfully planned and implemented circle times provide a jump-start for exciting early childhood curriculum! In contrast, poorly handled circles cause tension, frustration, and result in pitifully wasted learning opportunities.

Let this article motivate you. Make a commitment *today* to acquire the knowledge and talent required to provide children with a developmentally appropriate circle time. You'll reap rewards anxiously waiting to be discovered . . . and they're just around the circle!

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