

SEL-BASED OPENING CIRCLES

A QUICK GUIDE



Vermont
Afterschool

INTRODUCTION

Incorporating a consistent social and emotional learning (SEL)-based opening circle in your afterschool, summer time, or third-space program is a great way to build community among peers, teach children essential life and development skills, and encourage positive behaviors.

What are Some Benefits of Quality SEL-based Opening Circles?

- SEL is not intended to be a “behavior management system” but being intentional and consistent with the practices may prevent challenging behaviors from arising in the first place.
- Circles can be used to build a sense of belonging and trusting relationships, strengthen communication skills, and support equity of voice.
- When done well, the few minutes you set aside for a circle can shape the way the rest of your programming unfolds that day, and gives you an opportunity to review group norms daily in a fun and non-punitive way.

What positive outcomes might you see from doing opening circles?

- Building meaningful relationships and establishing trust (student to student and teacher to student) while fostering a kinder community
 - This is an opportunity for students to practice empathy, compassion, and listening
- Setting the tone for a positive classroom climate
 - Opening circles allow for consistent reviewing of group norms without a punitive undertone or as a result of a norm being broken
- Creating a space to highlight and discuss mental health needs
 - When we as adults model slowing down and recognizing how we are feeling, we encourage young people to develop the self-awareness to do the same
- Promoting the idea that all voices matter and are listened to
 - Sitting in a circle implies that everyone is on the same level and can be seen and heard by the whole group
- Providing opportunities for teaching social, emotional, and academic skills
 - Whatever skills you would like your students to develop to address any distracting or inappropriate behaviors you may be seeing, there is likely an SEL activity that targets it
- Increasing student confidence and self-awareness
 - When young people have more positive interactions with their peers and feel part of a loving and supportive community, they are more likely to thrive
- Motivating learners to do their best and supporting academic learning
 - When norms of psychological safety and regulation—skills SEL promotes—are part of your program, students are able to engage in higher-order thinking and learn new skills with more ease

GUIDE

Frequency of Opening Circles

Opening circles do not need to happen every day in order to still see their benefits. In an ideal programming world, every day would start and end with opening and closing circles, but time constraints and capacity issues are real concerns. Picking one or two days per week to have an opening circle (but sticking to those selected days throughout your program!) is still enough to experience some of the benefits they offer; even if they aren't daily, they can still be part of your program.

Setting Up The Physical Space

- Can you make the lighting lower for your opening circle?
- Can you have soft music in the background?
- Can you put the chairs in a circle in the middle of the room so everyone is sitting at the same level and can see each other's faces and clearly hear their voices? Everyone is in the circle, no one on the outside
- Can students have access to fidgets that aren't distracting or messy (slime, foam, gel)?
- How can you make the room feel more "home-y" and calming, even for these 10 minutes?

Tips on How to Start the Opening Circle

- Start by identifying how often you will hold your opening circles. Remember, it doesn't have to be every day, it just has to be consistent. Circles can range from 5 minutes long to 20 minutes, whatever fits will do!
- If there's an issue that is causing the youth in your program to struggle—whether that's bullying, exclusion, trouble sharing or taking turns, talking over each other, or frequent arguing—there are SEL activities that directly address those issues. A simple search in Google for "SEL activities for youth to ____ (whatever SEL skill you want to introduce them to)" will generate hundreds of results.
- Think about your particular students—what kind of challenges usually arise for them?
 - Are they close friends, or many don't know each other?
 - Are you noticing certain behavior patterns that other students may be observing and picking up, or are your students frequently stressed and anxious? Maybe focusing on "coping skills" would be helpful
 - Do they enjoy and stay engaged while being read to? Maybe they'd like SEL-based short stories and other "what would you do" type scenarios

- Does your group have high-energy? Maybe active games (like Pictionary, iSpy, Red Light/Green Light) and mindfulness can be calming
- Are they a chatty and performative group? Maybe show & tell or a brief talent show (1 minute each) would be fun
- Is bullying a concern among your students? Scenario cards around empathy, caring for others, and friendship development skills may help
- Are they creative, and do they enjoy writing? Having a short story free-write (for 3-5 minutes) and share-out among peers could be fun. Bonus points if you use youth voice and rotate which of them picks the prompt for that day!

Resources for Planning

- **Ripple Kindness Project** [<https://ripplekindness.org/>]
- **Pathway 2 Success** [<https://www.thepathway2success.com/>]
- **Teach to Love Learning** [<https://teachtolovelearning.com/>]

This short list is not comprehensive by any means, but all of these resources were selected for a few reasons:

- They all have curriculum examples that are well thought out and ready to be printed and used in your programs
- They are easy to navigate, visually appealing and offer a range of ages in their materials
- They have explicit SEL instruction, curriculum and activity options that are easy to facilitate, accessible in the materials they require, and directly target specific SEL skill development

Support from Vermont Afterschool

If you or your program would like to receive specialized coaching support for implementing SEL-based opening circles in your program, please contact Marla Goldstein [marla@vermontafterschool.org] to set up a time to chat. We're here to help!