

15

Inside Open Circle

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It is time for a multiplication facts test in Ms. Tosches's third-grade class. But instead of asking the children to clear their desks and get out a pencil, the teacher first leads them through calm breathing steps. "Breathe in slowly and deeply, filling your belly with air like a balloon," Ms. Tosches says. "Now, breathe out slowly. Let's do it two more times."

Out on the playground, a first grader comes running to his teacher. "He won't let me have a turn on the swing." Instead of intervening, the teacher asks the child if this is a "Double D." "No," says the child, realizing that nothing dangerous or destructive is happening. The teacher then coaches him on how to solve the problem himself. "What steps can you take if you can't get a turn on the swing?" his teacher prompts. "What are some of the things you can say to that person?" Soon, the child is happily swinging.

A first-grade girl has been having a terrible time at home in the morning getting dressed for school. The problem goes on for weeks, and the parent mentions it to her child's teacher. "Your daughter is a very good problem solver," says Ms. Jay, the teacher. "Why don't you let her help solve the problem?" So the next morning, the mother says to her daughter, "We have this problem, and Ms. Jay said you know how to problem solve." The minute the little girl hears this, she says, "I'll take care of it." She goes to her room and makes a chart of the steps she wants to take, including what she wants her mother to do and what her part of the bargain will be. If she gets dressed independently and on time, she will get a sticker. "After months of fighting in the mornings, the problem was solved that simply," says Ms. Jay, "because the child saw herself as powerful to solve it."

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THE OPEN CIRCLE CURRICULUM

What do these three situations have in common? In each of them, the child's elementary school communities participate in the Open Circle Program, based at the Stone Center, part of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College, and use the Open Circle curriculum (Seigle, Lange, & Macklem, 2003).

Open Circle, a year-long curriculum and approach for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, helps equip children with skills necessary to develop healthy, positive relationships. Students learn how to communicate effectively with each other, how to solve problems, how to listen, how to respect differences, and more.

Twice a week, students gather their chairs into a circle. "We form a circle because in that shape, you can see everyone, making it feel more welcome," explains Emily, a fifth grader. "Not wanting anyone to feel left out, we always leave in an extra space in case a guest walks in the room while we are in Open Circle." For 15 to 30 minutes, the classroom teacher and students discuss a lesson topic and do an activity, such as a role play or a game that reinforces a concept presented. By consistently coming together in a circle twice a week, a context is created that allows children not only to learn and practice social skills but also to bring issues to the circle that are important to them. These include issues such as problems from the playground, incidents in the cafeteria, or classroom interactions.

The Open Circle curriculum is grade differentiated. The same topics and concepts are presented in all six books, but at an age-appropriate depth. Each year a child participates in Open Circle, concepts are reinforced and skills are practiced, with fresh activities, assignments, and children's literature suggestions at each grade level.

The Open Circle curriculum contains 35 lessons in three sections. Lessons on creating a cooperative classroom environment include such topics as setting class rules, being a good listener, establishing nonverbal signals for the class, being inclusive, cooperating, dealing with teasing and discrimination, and speaking up. A second section of the curriculum gives students a six-step process for solving people problems. A third group of lessons on building positive relationships includes topics such as expressing anger appropriately, reading body language, and practicing positive self-talk.

INVOLVING THE ENTIRE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Students are not the only ones who learn and practice the relationship skills presented in Open Circle. The entire elementary school community is included: classroom teachers, principals, parents, school support staff, and specialists.

Teachers who implement the Open Circle curriculum in their classroom for the first time attend four full days of training over the course of a year. A significant portion of their training involves experiential activities that give them an opportunity to reflect on their own social competency skills. The training encourages teachers to be aware of the extent to which they model the behaviors they are teaching their students. In addition, teachers learn and practice the skill of facilitation, which is central to the program. As a facilitator of children's learning, teachers assume the role of a conductor who focuses on the learning process and guides by asking reflective questions, giving feedback, listening, and helping to process group and individual experiences. Time in training is also spent reflecting on their teaching practices. Throughout the first year, teachers also receive coaching and consultation in their classroom.

Principals may attend a full-day workshop to learn about the program and the social competency concepts that children are learning in the classroom, or they may attend a year-long principal leadership program to explore in more depth how to support the program as a schoolwide initiative. They practice the skills and are encouraged to use them not only with the children in their buildings but also with staff and parents. Many principals hold staff meetings in an Open Circle format and use the six problem-solving steps to address staff and schoolwide issues.

School support staff and specialists have the opportunity to participate in a special training that gives them an overview of the program and allows them to capitalize on students' skill development as they work with them.

Parents, a vital link to the success of the program in a school community, receive training too. A five-session parent course led by a school psychologist or social worker who has been trained to run the workshops is offered at their children's school. Open Circle vocabulary and concepts are introduced, and parents practice skills such as giving and receiving compliments, being a good listener, and problem solving. Parents even get homework assignments, just like their children. Often, the assignment is to practice a social competency concept with their child and write a reflection on the results. "My child was surprised to hear me use the same language that he knows from school," said one parent. "This is providing the consistency that children need." In addition, sample family newsletters in English and Spanish are included with the curriculum. Teachers can send these letters home to let families know what their children are discussing in Open Circle. The newsletters include key vocabulary, children's literature suggestions, and ideas for activities parents can do at home to reinforce or extend the social competency concepts presented at school.

To ensure sustainability of Open Circle, school teams including teachers, principals, and other staff are invited to participate in a program that supports them in developing and implementing a plan over time to establish Open Circle as an integral part of their school culture. A leadership program for principals focuses on building an adult community that "lives" our expectations for children.

DEALING WITH DANGEROUS, DESTRUCTIVE, AND ANNOYING BEHAVIOR

Two lessons in the Open Circle curriculum that teachers find particularly helpful for students are "Dealing with Dangerous and Destructive Behavior" and "Dealing with Annoying Behavior." In the first of these two lessons, the objective is to understand when it is important to go immediately to a responsible adult for help, and the concept of Double Ds, or "dangerous and destructive" behavior is introduced. Dangerous behavior means that someone might get hurt. Destructive behavior means that something might get broken, damaged, or destroyed. Mean teasing and bullying are also examples of destructive behavior.

The teacher asks students for examples of dangerous and destructive behavior that may occur in school or on the playground. Students are reminded that they can always talk to a responsible adult about something that is important to them, but that it is especially important to tell an adult immediately if someone is doing something dangerous or destructive. The teacher asks, "Who is a responsible adult that you could talk to on the playground? in the lunchroom? on the bus?"

For homework, students are asked to be aware of and make a list of behaviors in three categories: dangerous, destructive, or annoying.

- At the next Open Circle meeting, students review the definition of a Double D and who to tell if they see a Double D behavior in class, at recess, or in the cafeteria. At the third-grade level, for example, the lesson proceeds:

Ask students to give you some examples of annoying behaviors (copying someone's answers, cutting in line, etc.).

Ask students how they feel when someone annoys them (angry, frustrated, etc.). Ask students what they usually do or say when someone annoys them. Have them evaluate the consequences of several ways of responding to annoying behavior:

If they ignore the annoying behavior, what might happen?

If they tell the teacher, what might happen?

If they yell at the person, what might happen?

- Suggest that when someone is annoying you, it is helpful to use words in a positive and constructive way to tell the person what you do not like and what you would like them to do instead. For example, "It hurts when you poke me. Please stop." Or, "When you take my markers without asking, I don't know where they are when I need them. Next time, please ask me before borrowing something."

- Some steps for dealing with annoying behavior are as follows:

Say what is annoying you and how it affects you or makes you feel.

(It's annoying. It's distracting. It's disturbing you, etc.) You might use the statement, "I feel _____ when you _____."

Say what you want to happen instead.

- Ask for two volunteers to do a role play for the class. Have one choose an annoying behavior and role-play it. Then have the other person respond to it by telling why the behavior is bothering him or her and what he or she would like to have happen. Have the first student respond. Call attention to tone of voice, body language, and so forth. Ask students whether they feel this response would work for them. What are the effective parts about it? What might not be as effective? Ask students what they can do if it does not work.

These two lessons equip children with the ability to decide when a situation needs immediate help from an adult. They also give children strategies for dealing with the many incidents of annoying behavior that happen daily at school. Yet students are assured that teachers and other adults in their school community are always willing to help if they cannot deflect annoying behavior by themselves. Beyond the children gaining effective interpersonal skills, the teacher also gains valuable time in the classroom to concentrate on instruction rather than dealing with episodes of annoying behavior.

Same Lesson Topic at Different Grade Levels

At the kindergarten and fifth-grade levels, these two lessons are similar to the third-grade lesson presented previously, in that they introduce and reinforce the Double D vocabulary and emphasize the importance of telling a responsible adult when dangerous or destructive behavior is involved. However, kindergartners hear a story about annoying classroom behavior and its effect on the classroom. They are asked to discriminate between Double D and merely annoying behaviors. Then they are presented with the strategy of using words rather than action to deal with annoying behavior. Volunteers are asked to role-play situations using words as a response to annoying behavior.

Fifth graders also use the Double D vocabulary and give examples of Double D and non-Double D behavior. However, the concept is expanded to include discussion of how difficult it can be to tell on a friend and what might happen after someone tells on a classmate. Each student is asked to name something he or she does that others might find annoying. The students discuss responses to annoying behavior and the consequences of those responses. Students are then presented with a three-step strategy for dealing with annoying behavior:

1. Describe the behavior that is annoying you.
2. State how you feel about it and how it affects you. ("I feel _____ when you _____.")
3. Say what you want to have happen instead.

Students are reminded that it is important to tell the person directly what he or she is doing that annoys you in a way that is respectful and constructive. After a volunteer role-plays about dealing with annoying behavior, fifth graders discuss whether the response would be effective, what they might do if the annoying behavior continues, and the responsibility of the annoyer to respond to a request to stop annoying behavior. Across the grade levels, students are presented with the same basic vocabulary and concepts. However, the concepts are explored in greater, age-appropriate depth as students progress through Open Circle grade levels.

A FORUM FOR CLASSROOM ISSUES

In addition to teaching children social competency skills, Open Circle serves as a forum for dealing with classroom issues. If there is a problem to solve or a group decision to make, such as how to prevent older kids from interfering with recess games or how to spend money that the class has raised, students and teachers can use Open Circle as a forum to discuss the issue. They know that twice each week, time will be set aside to deal with their issues. A school counselor commented, "Open Circle is a perfect forum for discussing difficult topics. The children have learned that it is a time to talk about things that are important to them but may not be easy to discuss, and a time when they feel safe and dare to take risks. A second-grade teacher and I called a special Open Circle to talk about muscular dystrophy." One of the students in that class who has muscular dystrophy was having increasing difficulty moving around the classroom and wanted his classmates to understand how he felt. So the counselor, teacher, parent, and student together planned a special

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hypothesis that having 2 or more years of Open Circle in elementary school has an impact on social adjustment even after children are no longer exposed to the program in middle school.

Tools to Monitor Progress: The curriculum also includes tools to help teachers and students themselves assess their progress. Each new lesson begins with a review of homework from the last lesson designed to help students begin to apply the concepts they are learning. Also, each section of the curriculum ends with a lesson that gives students and teacher the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate what they have learned. They set class goals and individual goals for specific skills they need to work on. For example, at the end of the section "Creating a Cooperative Classroom Community," third graders complete the questionnaire in Table 15.1. Then together, students and teacher complete a summary for the entire class. (See Table 15.2.)

Teachers often report a growth in positive student behavior, a sense of responsibility students feel toward the class, and the development of a caring classroom community. Many teachers also tell us that the program has touched their lives, both professionally and personally, and allowed them to act in a more "authentic" manner in the classroom. They have found themselves to be better listeners and better at calming down in stressful situations and sharing control with their class. Other teachers say that they talk less and ask questions more often, and they have become more reflective and aware of the ways in which adult behavior fails to align with their expectations for children.

A special education teacher comments,

The most important benefit of Open Circle to me as a special education teacher is the acceptance that it fosters of the individual differences of the students. In Open Circle, it does not matter who cannot read or spell. A level playing field is provided, where what matters is the person, and every student is made to feel that he or she is an integral part of that classroom. Some of the brightest, most verbose students have to learn to listen and be patient, and the most reserved, least expressive students are heard.

Teachers consistently report that Open Circle creates an environment in which everyone can participate, regardless of their skills. Community-building lessons help create an acceptance and respect for each child in the classroom. Often, children who previously were scapegoats or directly blamed for poor social behavior are encouraged by their classmates, who become allies with the teacher in supporting positive social behavior. Many special educators view Open Circle as an opportunity to reinforce in a group setting the concepts they teach their students individually.

A principal remarked that since Open Circle began in his school, "schoolwide, the number of children sent to me has gone way down, along with the severity of incidents." The program reinforces his view of discipline—that it is not about yelling or punishing. "I see my role as a disciplinarian is to help kids learn more about the mistakes they made and figure out strategies to prevent them from happening again. When I meet with students who have participated in Open Circle, I can remind them of the problem-solving steps they have learned with me," he says.

Table 15.1 Student Evaluation Tool

Name: _____

Date: _____

For each behavior listed below, either check **yes** if you are doing it, check **no** if you are not doing it, or check **sometimes** if you are doing it sometimes.

	Yes	No	Sometimes
1. Listening	_____	_____	_____
2. Using nonverbal signals	_____	_____	_____
3. Giving compliments	_____	_____	_____
4. Including others	_____	_____	_____
5. Encouraging others	_____	_____	_____
6. Cooperating	_____	_____	_____
7. Tattling	_____	_____	_____
8. Dealing with situations myself	_____	_____	_____
9. Dealing with teasing	_____	_____	_____
10. Speaking up	_____	_____	_____

List below the skills you would like to work on:

Table 15.2 Class Summary Sheet for Student Evaluation

Teacher: _____

Number of students in class: _____

Grade: _____

Date: _____

	Yes	No	Sometimes
1. Listening	_____	_____	_____
2. Using nonverbal signals	_____	_____	_____
3. Giving compliments	_____	_____	_____
4. Including others	_____	_____	_____
5. Encouraging others	_____	_____	_____
6. Cooperating	_____	_____	_____
7. Tattling	_____	_____	_____
8. Dealing with situations myself	_____	_____	_____
9. Dealing with teasing	_____	_____	_____
10. Speaking up	_____	_____	_____

CONCLUSION

The student-centered nature of Open Circle is best captured in the words of a fourth grader. This student once described Open Circle in terms of a toolbox: "The most important thing we've learned is how to deal with our problems in a peaceful and nonviolent way. That helps in the real world and especially on the playground. I guess what you're doing is getting supplies for your toolbox that you're going to need later in life to fix up the problems you have." Open Circle provides a structure for many significant adults in a child's life, as well as peers, to help fill that toolbox.

Authors' Note: Ongoing information about all aspects of the Open Circle Program can be found at www.open-circle.org.

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