

Teaching Tips for Successful Circle Times

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Circle time, also called group time, refers to any time that a group of children are together for an activity. It's a special time to share fingerplays, chants, and rhymes; sing songs; play rhythm instruments; read a story; and participate in movement games and relaxation activities. Circle time is also a wonderful time to develop listening skills and attention spans, promote oral communication, teach new concepts and skills, and have FUN. The following tips will help you make your group time more effective and enjoyable for all involved.

Plan it Out. Schedule two main circle times - one at the beginning of the day and the other at the end of the day. The first group time builds a sense of community by acknowledging "who's here" and "what's happening." The closing circle time should include activities appropriate to the children's age, experience, and development. Some examples might include music, poetry, fingerplays, games, puppets, flannel board stories, and creative activities.

Location, Location, Location. Set up an area for circle time so that children face away from an open door, ongoing preparations for another activity, or any other distractions. If you have a large, colorful educational area rug, have children find an animal, number, shape, or letter to sit on. You can also place tape on the floor in the shape of a circle or purchase small carpet squares or cushions to designate each child's "personal" space. Consider having the easily distracted children sit close to you to help maintain their engagement.

Don't Sit Like a W. How the children sit at circle time is important, too. The phrase "CRISS CROSS APPLESAUCE" serves as a helpful reminder for children to sit in a healthy, safe way. Encourage children to sit cross-legged or sit with their feet in front of them. Discourage the unhealthy and even potentially harmful sitting habit known as W sitting. W sitting is described as sitting between your legs, knees turned in, and feet out to the sides.

Keep Your Circle Times Short. Toddlers have a maximum attention span of five to 10 minutes and most three- to five-year-olds can only attend for up to 15 minutes. If you see the group starting to become disengaged, it's ok to divert from your plan. Do another fingerplay instead of discussing your weekly theme, or end circle time early.

Involve Everyone! Do not force children to participate in circle time. Being "actively involved" to some children is watching, listening, and sensing. Encourage shy children to join in when they are comfortable and ready. Be aware of children who are becoming disengaged. They might demonstrate this by touching their peers, rolling on the floor or trying to take toys off nearby shelves. When you see this start to happen, create ways to engage those children using helper jobs or mini-movement activities. Some examples of helper jobs include asking the child to come to the front and show his peers the book, count the numbers on the calendar or pass out manipulatives. Some examples of mini-movement activities include pretending to be different animals, sings songs like "If You're Happy and You Know It" or doing kinesthetic patterns like *clap, clap, pat*.

Model and Reward Appropriate Behavior. Acknowledge and reinforce appropriate behavior. Tell the children what good listeners they are, how well they can control their bodies, what great voices they have, etc. Be sure to apply the same rules to all of the children. If you ask the children to sit on the edge of the rug, all of the children should be expected to do so without exception. Use other adults in the classroom as models. If you have an assistant, she should be sitting with the children on the rug and participating in the activities.

Organize Activities in a Sequence. Sequenced activities help children learn and do what is expected.

- Welcome children to circle time with a hello song or name game.
- After the group has gathered, increase children's alertness with an active or familiar song.
- Then move on to some academic tasks such as calendar and rule review.
- Next, get everybody up and off their bottoms with an energizing activity, such as a movement or action song. Engage and actively involve children, enhancing gross motor development and coordination.
- Follow this with a calming activity that helps focus children's attention by reading a story, participating in a discussion or demonstration, or inviting children to be in a "play." Make books fun and engaging by using props and manipulatives. You can also use velcro to make the story interactive. Try adding numbers, colors or animals. Book with repeated lines or rhymes are great for preschoolers. Pause while you read and look expectantly at the children. See if they can fill in the repeated line or rhyme!

- Signal that group time is over by gradually dispersing the group with a transition activity such as a closing or goodbye song. A closing routine should involve review of the day's schedule, especially what comes next.

Have Fun! The most important advice is to be enthusiastic, smile, be spontaneous, and enjoy circle time with your children!