

# Building Classroom Relationships and Culture

Many schools are adopting restorative justice practices to create more relationship-centered school cultures. Learn more about how to use restorative justice circles in your classroom and find three sample activities.



# What is Restorative Justice?

According to [Amplify RJ](#), restorative justice (RJ) is: “a philosophy and set of practices, rooted in Indigenous teachings, that emphasize our interconnection by repairing relationships when harm occurs while proactively building and maintaining relationships to prevent future harm.”

Restorative justice centers on the dignity of every human being. It holds seven core assumptions about the human condition to be true:

1. The true self in everyone is good, wise, and powerful.
  2. The world is profoundly interconnected.
  3. All human beings have a deep desire to be in a good relationship.
  4. All human beings have gifts, and everyone is needed for what they bring.
  5. Everything we need to make positive change is already here.
  6. Human beings are holistic.
  7. We need practices to build habits of living from the core self.
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## Preparing For an RJ Circle

Here are the steps you can take with students to build the foundation for the RJ circles in your classroom:

- **Name the purpose:** To start an RJ circle practice with your students, it is important to share with students what RJ is and why you are doing this. You can talk about how the RJ circle process allows everyone to share their true selves. In the circle, everyone is equal.
- **Create circle agreements:** Next, you can create “circle agreements” as a class. These agreements will be the guidelines for how everyone treats each other in the circle. Some common circle agreements include: speak from the heart, listen from the heart, respect the talking piece, and you always have the right to pass. Post these agreements in a place where everyone can see them during your circles.
- **Choose a talking piece:** A talking piece is an item used to show whose turn it is to talk. If someone is holding the talking piece, they may talk, but everyone else in the circle must quietly listen. Some classes may choose to use a soft toy, a stick, a gourd, or another item of significance as a talking piece.
- **Choose a centerpiece:** The centerpiece is placed on the floor in the middle of the circle. It represents what the community values. Some centerpieces may be made up of items from nature, like seashells and stones. Others may include artwork made together by the class.

# Facilitating an RJ Circle

Once you have prepared the other elements of the circle, you are ready to facilitate. Here is the structure that many RJ circles follow:

- **Circle agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class.
- **Opening quote:** Provide an opening quote that matches the theme of your circle. This quote can also be discussed and explored throughout the circle.
- **Mindfulness exercise:** Use a video [like this one](#) to help everyone get centered.
- **Check-in round:** Ask something like, “How are you feeling today on a scale from 1–5?” or [use these ideas](#) to get a sense of how students are feeling.
- **Question rounds:** The circle facilitator will choose questions to ask everyone based on the theme of the circle. Each person in the circle will have the chance to answer the questions one at a time. The person holding the talking piece speaks, while everyone else quietly listens. They may also say “pass” if they would not like to answer. They then give the talking piece to the person next to them so they can answer, and so on.
- **Check-out round:** You can use the same method you used during the check-in round. Use this round to see if any students shared that their mood went up or down after the circle. If any of them say their moods went down, check in with those students later. See if there was anything that was said that was harmful to them and work together to determine how the student would like that to be addressed.
- **Closing quote:** End the circle with another quote that relates to the theme, usually with a hopeful or inspiring message.



# Making RJ Circles Accessible

Some students may need accommodations to fully participate in the circle process. Sitting for long periods of time and refraining from interrupting can be especially challenging for neurodivergent students. Some ways to support these students are:

- **Normalizing movement:** When reviewing your class' circle agreements, remind students that it is OK to stand up and stretch by your chair if you need to. Work together as a class to come up with ways to do this that are not distracting. You can normalize movement as the adult facilitator by modeling this during the circle if you need a moment to stretch.
- **Providing fidget toys:** Fidget toys can help students to better focus on the conversation. Some examples of fidget toys are: a stress ball, rubix cube, or tangle. It is ideal to choose items that can be used quietly so they do not disrupt or distract the other people in the circle.
- **Playing a game:** Sometimes, mixing it up can provide more opportunities for engagement if students are struggling to sit and focus for long periods of time. You can begin the circle in the typical way. Then, spend the rest of the time playing a game together as a class. If you are outside, students could play soccer, kickball, run relay races, etc. If students are inside, you could play games like "Zip, Zap, Zop," "Change Places If You..." "Night at the Museum," etc.

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## Avoiding Harm During RJ Circles

While RJ circles are a helpful tool for building classroom community and culture, they can also be harmful if not done mindfully.

- **Avoid forcing students to speak:** Teachers often want to ensure that students are accountable for their learning. In circles, learning can happen quietly. Allow students to "pass" when they need or want to. Do not force them to talk about a topic that may be uncomfortable for them. This could be psychologically damaging and may also make them less likely to want to engage in the circle process.
- **Avoid asking students to disclose things they might not want to talk about, particularly trauma:** Remind students that they don't have to share anything they don't want to, and that it is important not to repeat what people share outside of the circle. Finally, in case a student does share something difficult and needs support afterward, come up with a plan ahead of time that ensures the student gets the care and resources they need after the circle.
- **Avoid appropriating Indigenous cultures:** RJ is rooted in Indigenous teaching and philosophy. There is a difference between honoring that tradition and appropriating or mocking that tradition. If you are not an Indigenous teacher, avoid doing things like wearing an Indigenous headdress or face paint. Some teachers may think this helps "set the mood" but it is actually racist and can be harmful to BIPOC students in the room, especially Indigenous students.

# Activity 1:

## Building Relationships Within the Classroom

These restorative justice circle guides focus on helping students build relationships with their peers and the adults who support them. The questions in these guides focus on having fun and learning more about one another. You can use these guides at any point during the school year, but relationship-building circles are especially helpful at the beginning of the year to help create a culture of belonging in your classroom.

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### Elementary

**Circle Agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class. Some examples are: speak from your heart, listen from your heart, respect the talking piece, you always have the right to pass, and what happens here, stays here.

**Opening Quote:** “Be somebody who makes everybody feel like a somebody!” –Kid President

**Mindfulness Exercise:** [English Meditation](#) / [Spanish Meditation](#)

**Check-in Round:** How are you doing today on a scale from 1-5? (One is the lowest, five is the highest.)

**Question 1:** Would you rather be a professional athlete or a professional musician?

**Question 2:** If you could have dinner with anyone in the world, who would it be? Why?

**Question 3:** What is something you are looking forward to in the next week or two?

**Closing Quote:** “A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions. And the roots spring up and make new trees.” –Amelia Earhart

# Secondary

**Circle Agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class. Some examples are: speak from your heart, listen from your heart, respect the talking piece, you always have the right to pass, and what happens here, stays here.

**Opening Quote:** "Those who forgive themselves and are able to accept their true nature...those are the strong ones!" -Itachi from Naruto

**Mindfulness Exercise:** [English Meditation](#) / [Spanish Meditation](#)

**Check-in Round:** Share two words that describe how you are feeling today. For example: grateful and sleepy

**Question 1:** Is cereal a soup?

**Question 2:** If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?

**Question 3:** If you could pick one restaurant to serve their food in the cafeteria, which would you choose?

**Question 4:** What is something that made you laugh recently?

**Closing Quote:** "If you think and achieve as a team, the individual accolades will take care of themselves. Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships." -Michael Jordan



# Activity 2:

## Integrating Curriculum with Social-Emotional Learning

As teachers, sometimes it can be hard to fit everything into one school day. You have curriculum expectations you need to meet, but your students also need social-emotional learning opportunities. These restorative justice circle guides will show some examples of how you can integrate them both.

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### Elementary

**Book:** "What Do You Do With An Idea?" by Kobi Yamada and Mae Besom

**Circle Agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class. Some examples are: speak from your heart, listen from your heart, respect the talking piece, you always have the right to pass, and what happens here, stays here.

**Opening Quote:** "Out of nowhere, an idea appeared. It was glorious and bright and egg-shaped and adorned with a golden crown. It looked delightful, yet curious." –"What Do You Do With An Idea?"

**Mindfulness Exercise:** [English Meditation](#) / [Spanish Meditation](#)

**Check-in Round:** If your mood were the weather, what would it be? (sunny, cloudy, rainy, etc.) or [these ideas](#)

**Question 1:** Describe a time when you had a new idea. Maybe this was an invention or a new game you wanted to create. How did your idea make you feel?

**Question 2:** Why is it sometimes scary to share your ideas?

**Question 3:** What would you tell someone who wants to give up on their idea?

**Question 4:** How can an idea change the world?

**Closing Quote:** "Follow your dreams. They know the way." –Kobi Yamada

# Secondary

**Book:** "The House on Mango Street" by Sandra Cisneros

**Circle Agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class. Some examples are: speak from your heart, listen from your heart, respect the talking piece, you always have the right to pass, and what happens here, stays here.

**Opening Quote:** "I see a home in the heart" –Sandra Cisneros, "The House on Mango St."

**Mindfulness Exercise:** [English Meditation](#) / [Spanish Meditation](#)

**Check-in Round:** [Which of these animals do you feel like today?](#) Or [these ideas](#)

**Question 1:** Do you agree with the opening quote that our home is in our heart? What does the main character, Esperanza, think about this statement?

**Question 2:** Where do you feel most at home? What makes this place feel like home?

**Question 3:** How does Esperanza's home and neighborhood influence who she becomes? Do you think she would be a very different person if she lived somewhere else?

**Closing Quote:** "You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street." –Sandra Cisneros, "The House on Mango Street"





# Activity 3:

## Processing a Tragedy

These restorative justice circle guides focus on creating a space for students to process their feelings after a tragic event has occurred in the community or on a national/global scale.

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### Elementary

**Circle Agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class. Some examples are: Speak from your heart, listen from your heart, respect the talking piece, you always have the right to pass, and what happens here, stays here.

**Opening Quote:** "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other." -Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

**Mindfulness Exercise:** [Grief and Loss Meditation for Kids](#)

**Check-in Round:** How are you doing today on a scale from 1-5? (1 is the lowest, five is the highest.)

**Question 1:** Sometimes, we hear about things happening in our communities or on the news that make us worry. Have you seen anything on the news lately that has worried you or confused you? What questions do you have?

**Providing Context:** Provide facts for students about the that event occurred and give a general description of what happened. Refrain from providing details that could be retraumatizing, such as the specifics of the violent acts that took place. If a student has a reaction/question, validate their feelings and their curiosity. Remind them that everyone will have the opportunity to speak and let them know that they can ask their question when it is their turn. Pass the talking piece in the typical order.

**Question 2:** How are you feeling about what you have seen or heard?

**Question 3:** Who can you talk to about what you're feeling?

**Question 4:** What is something that helps you calm down when you are upset or hear about upsetting things?

**Question 5:** What is one act of kindness you can do today for someone you care about to support them during this difficult time?

**Check-out Round:** What color represents how you are feeling right now?

**Closing Quote:** "Learning to stand in somebody else's shoes, to see through their eyes, that's how peace begins." -Barack Obama

## Secondary

**Circle Agreements:** Here, you can remind everyone of the circle agreements you came up with as a class. Some examples are: Speak from your heart, listen from your heart, respect the talking piece, you always have the right to pass, and what happens here, stays here.

**Opening Quote:** "It's OK to feel. It's OK to feel bad. It's OK to let it out. It's OK to cry. It's OK to be angry. It's OK to not know what you need." -The Wellness Society

**Mindfulness Exercise:** Grief and Loss Meditation for Teens

**Check-in Round:** How are you doing today on a scale from 1-5? (1 is the lowest, five is the highest.)

**Question 1:** What have you seen or heard on the news this weekend? What questions do you have?

**Providing Context:** Provide facts for students about the that event occurred and give a general description of what happened. Refrain from providing details that could be retraumatizing, such as the specifics of the violent acts that took place. If a student has a reaction/question, validate their feelings and their curiosity. Remind them that everyone will have the opportunity to speak and let them know that they can ask their question when it is their turn. Pass the talking piece in the typical order.

**Question 2:** How are you feeling about what you have seen or heard?

**Question 3:** What helps you feel balanced when things like this happen? Do you spend time alone, journal, watch TV, scroll on your phone, find people to talk to, etc.?

**Question 4:** What is one thing you want to do to take care of yourself or someone you care about during this time?

**Check-out Round:** It is OK to feel whatever you are feeling right now. Sometimes, we might be feeling more than one emotion at once. What are two words that describe how you're feeling right now?

**Closing Quote:** "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." -Margaret Mead