****Practice Guidance

*Using Restorative Circles*

*“I like being in the circle as it made me feel safe.”* Devon Social Worker

*“Using the circle gave me opportunity to speak (which I don’t normally do in meetings).”* DevonFamily Practitioner

Circles are a process that help build a culture of empathy, through encouraging listening, respectful communication, and a consideration of the impact of behaviour on others. Circles can be used in a range of contexts, including; team meetings, multi-agency meetings, as well as meetings with young people, families and carers. They can be used as a process to check in, to identifying solutions to a problem or to consider a transition or change. This is a practice guidance document to aid the use of circles across Devon Children’s Services, to support the vision of embedding restorative practice (see [Restorative Practice with Motivational Interviewing Skills: One Minute Guide](http://www.proceduresonline.com/devon/childcare/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Restorative%20Practice%20with%20Motivational%20Interviewing%20Skills%20One%20Minute%20Guide%20.docx)).

**Circle process in Devon: values in action**

Circles provide a space for restorative principles and values to be seen in action. They are a coming together as equals with a value placed on collective wisdom and consensus decision making.

It is more than simply arranging chairs in a circle. Circles provide a safe platform for effect dialogue and sharing of power. When introduced with clear guidelines and facilitation, it creates a safe environment for honest discussion and the expression of feelings and needs.

Holding a circle creates a safe space which can:

* provide a space to be heard, for people to be listened to without interruption
* have views respected even if not necessarily agreed with
* create ownership of problem-solving and decision making by those directly involved
* foster accountability; empowerment; collaborative problem-solving
* build connections between colleagues, young people and families
* link thoughts, feelings and behaviour and appreciate how each person's behaviour impacts on everyone else.
* a focus on harm and how to repair this harm; on the effect of the action and who has been affected.
* allow for services to be shaped by all
* support families finding their own solutions.

Having a circle at the beginning of a re-occurring meeting, with a consistent framework allows for a regular mechanism for people to share their thoughts, feelings and needs. There are different types of circle (see Appendix 1), but all have the same components.

**Circle components**

**Talking piece**

A talking piece is an object which is passed around the circle. This can be an object that is tactile or easy to pass or an object which has meaning to the group. You can only speak when you are holding the talking piece. The facilitator can offer who wants to speak first and then the talking piece is passed to the left or to the right and goes around the group in a circular motion, not passed across the circle from person to person. This is to make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak and prevents the loudest voices from dominating. There is explicit permission that you do not have to speak; you can pass straight away or hold a silence. There should be no judgement on someone choosing to pass without speaking.

Focus needs to be on listening to others, rather than thinking about what you will say when the talking piece comes to you. Try to have faith that something will come to mind, if it doesn't or if someone has said what you had in mind, you can pass. If there is a need to respond to what has been raised in the circle, make time for the talking piece to go around again.

**Facilitator**

The facilitator will role model the values of the circle and set the tone. The facilitator holds the space as opposed to leading the circle. The more the facilitator assumes a high position, the less participants will feel a shared ownership. The facilitator will need to be someone who has a grasp on the circle process and confidence to keep the space safe. This does not need to be restricted to the manager of a team. The facilitator ensures the guidelines are in place and the circle can complete within the time allowed. They will clarify how long the circle will run for and will ask participants to moderate the length of their comments in order to ensure all participants have opportunity to speak. The facilitator may need to ask a participant to finish their comment and pass the talking piece on or interject if there is a need for reminding of the guidelines. The facilitator is an equal party and able to contribute their own perspective when it is their time with the talking piece.

Just as planning is essential for an effective meeting, supervision, or visit, planning a circle is vital. Preparation includes; who is to attend, explaining the process and the role of the facilitator, and identifying issues. If the circle intends to deal with difficult events and feelings, participants may need to be spoken to before the circle to help create a safe space.

Questions to consider during planning:

* What is the focus of the circle?
* What do you hope/expect to achieve?
* How might different people experience the circle?
* Do you anticipate any difficulties?
* What is going to happen afterwards?
* Will anything need to be followed up?

It is important that everyone is aware of the purpose of the circle before starting.

A circle has a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. The facilitator marks the beginning of the circle, acknowledges and thanks everyone present, shares how the circle process will operate and explains the reason for the circle (see Appendix 1: types of circles). It may be helpful to begin with a reflective pause to invite people into the space. This could be an inspirational quote, deep breathes, or piece of music. It is valuable to begin all circles with a check-in. Circle rounds follow, with a question posed by the facilitator that will aid connection and support, as well as honest dialogue where there may be conflict or difficulties (see Appendix 2: circle questions). Once a question is posed, the talking piece is pass round the circle cyclically.

If there are responses people want to add after hearing a comment, it may be helpful to go around the circle a second time before moving onto the next question. This will need to be judged by the facilitator in order to ensure everyone feels heard while being conscious of the time allocated to the circle session. It remains important to mark the end of a circle. You might like to do an ending round “Share a word or feeling as we are ending the circle”, or perhaps end as you began with a moment of focused breath, music or quote.

Consideration of an internal/external facilitator is needed depending on the purpose of the circle. If the circle is being used to manage a difficulty within a team or group of people, it may be beneficial for a neutral facilitator.

**Guidelines**

In order to create an environment where everyone feels safe, valued and included, everyone must have their say in developing an agreed code of conduct. A circle can be used to determine what guidelines are needed to keep the space safe.

It is helpful to imagine a second circle of children and families and what behaviour we would want to role model. Although each group will have differing guidelines to some extent, they will be founded on the core principle of treating one another with respect; *“honouring ourselves by acting in accordance with our values, honouring others by recognizing their right to be different, and treating others with dignity”* (Pranis, Stuart, Wedge, 2011). Before the start of any circle, a reminder of the core guidelines is needed.

**Other practical considerations**

The best circles are open with no barriers formed by tables or desks. That being said, circles can take place around a table with explicit acknowledgement that it creates a barrier and asking participants to lessen this by having laptops, phones, and notepads off the table. Virtual circles (using online platforms such as Teams, Zoom, Skype) are possible but not a preferred option (see Appendix 3).

The circle formation is important as each member needs to see the faces and body of whoever is speaking so body language is acknowledged as well as the content of what someone is saying.

The frequency of circles needs to be considered, along with whether you have a regularly scheduled circle, or it is impromptu (or both). Other considerations are, but not inclusive to; how much notice there is before a circle takes place and the impact of the day/time on people’s ability to participate.

**Challenges**

Circles are not without challenges. Circles call for participants to be ‘real’, to speak honestly about how we understand ourselves and experience a situation. Speaking in front of people or expressing emotion can make people feel anxious. Preparation is key. Having clear co-created guidelines to ensure a safe space is important, along with clear permission that when passed the talking piece, you are not obligated to speak. A difficult balance and careful ‘use of self’ is also needed when you hold a professional role with a family.

The most common pitfalls are not spending time planning or not allowing adequate time if a challenging issue is being considered. The facilitator will need to ensure participants are mindful of sharing time so everyone has an equal opportunity.

A circle is not the appropriate platform for information dissemination. Participants will need the relevant information before having a circle. Though it may be helpful to use a circle to gather feedback or different perspectives after the delivery of information.

Participants contributions within a circle are not part of performance data. Whilst everyone is granted the opportunity for their voice to be heard, there needs to be the permission for any participants to pass the talking piece without speaking if they chose to.

**Appendix 1: Types of circles**

**Talking circle**

This can be a way to build relationships across a group of people who meet regularly. A circle can be used to gain people’s views on a matter (such as a case reflection or decision) to ensure everyone’s voice is heard. This may be short or long in duration.

It is valuable to spend time using circles to build relationships (using questions to form a talking circle, see Appendix 2 for question suggestions), before using circles to deal with difficulties (solution finding circle). It is important to do a check-in at the beginning of other types of circles, so that everyone's need to feel heard is met.

**Solution finding circle**

Circles can be used to think about harm, whether it is a problem that everyone is facing or an incident that has happened. Rather than one person coming up with a solution and telling others what must happen, the problem becomes an opportunity to learn how to solve problems collaboratively, negotiate and share responsibility. It is important we do not consider people as the problem, as it's the problem that's the problem. It is the facilitators task to remind participants to identify the problem in a neutral way. If we take away the need to blame one person and see it as a joint problem to solve together, we are more able to find solutions.

Restorative questions can be used to go around the circle to contain the conversation and ensure that each participant has the opportunity to speak and be listened to (see Appendix 2).

**Transition / reintegration circle**

A circle can be held to support an individual to reintegrate back into a group, or to facilitate a transition. This could include a change in household, placement breakdown, changes in relationships, returning home, returning to work or consolidating permanence. The circle offers a space to name the feelings the change is eliciting for all those involved, the hopes and the fears. Individuals naming the support they need or can offer helps the transition.

**Celebration circles**

Circles can be used to celebrate an individual and celebrate teams. It may be an individual quality or something they (the individual or the team) have done or achieved. This helps build a culture where giving and receiving compliments, gratitude, and affirmations become common place, strengthening relationships.

If a person is being celebrated, they are asked to listen to the affirmation and be able to say 'thank-you'. It may be difficult for some to hear a barrage of affirming messages (especially if they have low self-esteem). It needs to be a matter of judgement and how each member of a team can experience a circle of appreciation.

**Appendix 2: Circle questions**

Questions are chosen depending on the need of a of the circle at that time. It is helpful to begin all circles with a check-in. It is important to follow difficult questions, which might leave participants feeling vulnerable, with a question which prompts a sense of positive possibilities. This enables the circle to end with a strong sense of connection and support. You cannot predict how long a round may take, so it is important you remain flexible and adapt your plan based on the needs of the circle.

**Guidelines**

What do you need to feel safe?

**Facilitation**

What do you need the facilitator to do to aid your experience of circles?

What have you noticed is the impact of who facilitates the circle?

When would it be helpful to have an external facilitator?

**Talking Circle**

Check-in:

How are you feeling in this moment?

What are you bringing into the room today?

If I was a weather, right now, I’d be…

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the best I’ve ever felt, right now I’m a… What is stopping me feeling (number one below), What would help me feel (number one above).

How do you look after yourself?

Team building:

What is working well in the team? What could we do differently?

What does being part of the team mean to you?

What has been the biggest challenge/success in your role?

Connection round:

Who would you want to have a road trip with and why?

What are you looking forward to when you get home today?

What was your favourite sweet as a child?

What is your favourite music for lifting your spirit?

What tickles your funny bone—something you can laugh at even in tough times? (movie, TV show, etc.)

Who is your role model?

What is one positive thing you can do for yourself in the next week?

**Problem Solving Circle**

Introduction:

‘We are sitting here to talk about what to do about X, for each of us to explain how we see things, how we are affected by what is happening or may happen and to think about what we each need to move on from this. Then we will try and come to an agreement about what we can all do to resolve this problem/repair the harm after the incident.’

Round one: What happened and what were your thoughts feelings?

Round two: What was the impact? (I’m affected because… and I also think… is being affected because…)

Round three: What needs to happen next?

**Transition or Reintegration Circle**

What is the upcoming change and what are your thoughts and feelings around this?

How is this change/situation impacting your relationships in your family/team? What support do you need? What support can you offer to help this change?

**Celebration Circle**

One thing I value/appreciate/like about X/the team…

**Appendix 3: Virtual circles (online support)**

The plethora of technology means we have more opportunity to connect when at a physical distance. It is possible to hold a virtual circle, and this can be a vital support mechanism for unprecedented times which have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, or for a county as geographically broad at Devon. A virtual circle should not be viewed as a like for like replacement to the value of holding a circle in person, given the restrictions caused by not being in the same room (recognising the entirety of body language, tone, emotion, increased distractions). But with careful thought, virtual circles can provide a way to connect with one another and to make sense of conflicts and difficulties.

**Adaptations**

There will not be a talking piece, but the function of a talking piece will need to be upheld; ensuring everyone has the opportunity to speak uninterrupted, distribution of power, listening and thoughtful reflection. Establishing a randomised order of who will speak will enable this to happen, without falling into the trap of only going to who wants to speak next. This prevents the same or the loudest voices from dominating the conversation. The explicit permission to pass or hold a contemplative silence remains.

The role of the facilitator and the importance of guidelines (as discussed above) remains, with the addition of indicating when and who is next person to speak.  
The facilitator begins with sharing how the circle process will work and the order of speaking. They will indicate the next person to speak when the time arises.

**Appendix 4: Principles of circles**

(Pranis, Stuart, Wedge, 2011)

1. Circles call us to act on our personal value (need for self-reflection)
2. Circles include all interests
3. Circles are easily accessible to all
4. Circles offer everyone an equal opportunity to participate
5. Involvement in circles in voluntary
6. In circles, everyone participates directly as themselves
7. Circles are guided by a shared vision
8. Circles are designed by those who use them
9. Circles are flexible in accommodating unique needs and interests
10. Circles take a holist approach
11. Circles maintain respect for all
12. Circles invite spiritual presence
13. Circles foster accountability to others and to the process.

**Appendix 5: Further reading**

*Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/ Old Approach to Peace Making* (2005). Kay Pranis

*Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* (2011). Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, Mark Wedge

*Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* (2015). Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Kay Pranis & Nany Riestenberg

*Just Care: Restorative justice Approaches to Working with Children in Public Care (2009).* Belinda Hopkins Chapter 7 ‘Circles’

*Online Support Circles in Response to Social Distancing* (2020). Kay Pranis <http://www.livingjusticepress.org/vertical/sites/%7B4A259EDB-E3E8-47CD-8728-0553C080A1B0%7D/uploads/Circles_Social_Distancing_4-6-20(1).pdf>