

How do you fit a square peg into an Open Circle?

Recommendations for holding Open Circle in person, hybrid, and remote



For many educators, starting school in the middle of the pandemic is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. SEL, as defined by CASEL, *"is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions¹."*

So how is this achieved while keeping a 6-foot distance from your students or meeting your students for the first time virtually through programs like Zoom or Google Meet? Trying to connect with your student when you can't put a comforting hand on their shoulder or can't see their face because they have their camera off is not what you were trained to do.

¹ The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), *What is SEL?* <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

It's not surprising that you may feel stress and anxiety. On top of all these changes, you need to teach Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) when you need emotional support and empathy yourself.

*To start, give yourself some grace. These are unprecedented times that extend beyond the pandemic. It is important to find the space and pace that **works for you**.*

The following are *recommendations* for implementing Open Circle. We recommend that you modify the pacing and utilize integration skills that fit the needs of the environment you are teaching in. Collaborate and find support among your peers.

Starting Open Circle This School Year

Whether you are teaching in person, hybrid, or completely online, Open Circle recommends that you try to hold daily Open Circle time or incorporate Open Circle lessons within your classwork until you cover all lessons in Units 1 and 2.

UNIT 1: BEGINNING TOGETHER

1. Getting In and Out of the Open Circle*
2. Being Together in Open Circle
3. Ways We Are the Same and Different
4. Classroom Rules
5. Nonverbal Signals

UNIT 2: MANAGING OURSELVES

6. Being Calm
7. Listening Skills
8. Recognizing and Naming Your Feelings
9. Body Language
10. Getting Calm When You Feel Upset
11. Positive Self-Talk

After the first two units are covered, slow down the pace so subsequent lessons are held 2 times per week. Before you progress to Unit 3 take a moment to review the Reflection Tools located at the end of each unit. Are there skills that you feel your students need to review? Are there ways you can reinforce these skills by integrating the lesson into another activity? There are Supplementary Lessons and Activities in your curriculum to help you further develop these skills.

Adaptations may need to be made to the following recommendations to conform with state, city, and school district safety guidelines.

*Getting In and Out of the Open Circle

The initial goal of Open Circle is building relationships by learning how to *Be Together*. When you have to social distance and/or teach remotely it may not be feasible to expect classrooms to hold traditional Open Circles (Unit 1, Lesson 1 - *Getting In and Out of the Open Circle*).

Unit 1, Lesson 1 discusses how to literally get into a circle but the foundation of this lesson is to create a routine that signals to children that it is time to come together as a community. The goal of Open Circle is to create a *safe space* for children to share. With the need for social distancing or for those schools that are holding remote learning, sitting in a circle is just not possible.

At the end of this document is an adaptation of Unit 1, Lesson 1 that takes into consideration the restrictions of social distancing and remote learning.

How to Hold Open Circle Time When You Can't Be in a Circle

Regardless of how you will be meeting with your students, carve out time to hold Open Circle with your class and develop a ritual that works for your environment. Create a space where students know they can share and feel safe.

Here are some options for holding in person (IP) and remote learning (RL) Open Circles:

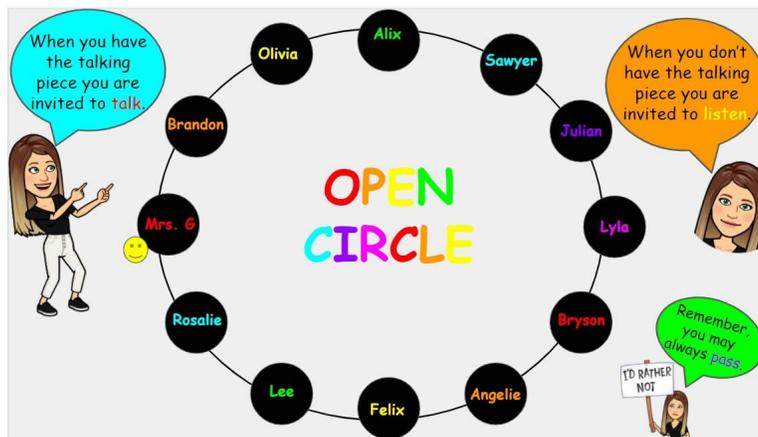
- (IP) Hold Open Circle outdoors with students spaced safely apart (when weather permits).
- (IP) If students are required to stay in their assigned seats, include the extra chair in a designated spot in the room. Invite a special guest to join an Open Circle time.
- (IP)(RL) Create a symbol that Open Circle time is starting. This can be as simple as a sign that is placed at the front of the class, held up for students to see via camera, or via shared screen mode. (Download this image at www.open-circle.org/images/pdf/COVID_19/Its_time_for_video.gif)



- (IP)(RL) Begin Open Circle with a mindfulness activity signaling to students that it is time to slow down, focus our thoughts, and be prepared to share and reflect. Some suggestions are chair yoga or a breathing exercise. More ideas can be

found under the Activities section of the curriculum, under Mindfulness Practices and Activities.

- (RL) Utilize whole-group responses to help children share and engage them to participate, such as thumbs-up, sign language, hand on head, touch your nose, etc. A list of whole-group response ideas can be found in the resource section of the curriculum.
- (RL) Create a sign-in routine using an online annotation tool or a whole-group response (see example in the revised Unit 1, Lesson 1 below).
- (RL) Create a visual representation of an Open Circle meeting using an icon to signal who's turn it is to share. Melissa Greenstein, an Open Circle teacher from Temple Beth AM in Florida shared a great example using Google Sheets or PowerPoint (including [video directions!](#) - www.open-circle.org/hidden/virtual-opencircle1)



Integrating Open Circle Lessons Into Academic Areas

The Open Circle curriculum is designed to be implemented as a specific meeting time for children to learn SEL skills, but its intention has always been for students to learn these skills and apply them throughout their classroom day and in their community, and for the skills to be reinforced at home. Whether you are able to hold Open Circle meeting time or not, find ways to integrate Open Circle lessons into academics. When possible, begin by introducing an Open Circle lesson prior to jumping into the academic lesson. The following are some examples:

- **Positive Self-Talk (Unit 2, Lesson 11)** - Review this lesson and adapt the language to fit the subject area you will be incorporating. Begin by sharing the *Positive Self-Talk* poster and read aloud the definition. Explain how positive self-talk can be used when working on this subject area. Ask students how they could use positive self-talk to encourage themselves. Upon returning to the class after completing their assignment, have the students reflect and share if they used positive self-talk while they were working on their assignment. Reinforce this lesson with the Positive Self-Talk Worksheet, with a literature connection, or with a supplementary lesson (found in the curriculum at the end of Unit 2, Lesson 11). If teaching in a remote setting, have students change their screen names to a positive self-talk statement while they work on the assignment.

- **Cooperating (Unit 3, Lesson 14)** - Review this lesson and adapt the language to fit the subject area you will be incorporating. Ask students to give a thumbs-up if they were able to include someone who was feeling left out in a game or other activity. Ask how it felt to include someone. Tell students that another way we can all feel included in the classroom is to work together and cooperate. Ask students what the word “cooperate” means to them. Share the Cooperate mini-poster and have a student read aloud the definition. Ask students to describe how the children in the picture are cooperating. Introduce your academic lesson and establish expectations of cooperation when working in groups. When the students return from working in groups, discuss how they cooperated. You may even ask students to think about what might be different about cooperating in a remote learning setting or socially distanced setting versus what they were accustomed to before.
- **Literature Connections** - Children's literature is a great way to incorporate an Open Circle lesson. Open Circle has curated lists of children's literature that can be found on our website at www.open-circle.org/resources/childrens-literature. Our primary list is sorted by the 5 CASEL competencies. On our website you will also find thematic lists such as Bilingual (Spanish/English), Poetry Month, Mindfulness, and Taking Care of Yourself and Others.

Reviewing Key Open Circle Vocabulary, Skills, and Concepts

With the high level of stress and anxiety children are feeling during the pandemic, it may be helpful to review key concepts from Units 1 and 2, even if those units have already been completed. On the Open Circle website there is a COVID-19 resource titled [Remote Open Circle](http://www.open-circle.org/covid-19-resources/covid19-remote-opencircle) (www.open-circle.org/covid-19-resources/covid19-remote-opencircle) that was created in spring 2020 to help teachers who suddenly moved to a remote teaching environment midway through the Open Circle curriculum. This document reviews skills and concepts students have already learned and helps them to apply them in new ways. This is an opportunity for students to strengthen and practice these skills as we continue to build community.

UNIT 1, LESSON 1 - Getting In and Out of the Open Circle (revised 2020)

OBJECTIVES

- To explain/review the purpose of Open Circle
- To create a routine that defines a time and space for Open Circle
- To create a space where children feel safe and free to share their feelings and opinions non-judgmentally
- To work cooperatively as a class to make and carry out a plan
- To define “reflection”

MATERIALS

- Reflection mini-poster
- Chart paper and markers or white board or online document that children can see
- Image of Open Circle logo
 - Horizontal logo with words



www.open-circle.org/images/Logo/OpenCircle_Logo_horizontal.jpg

- Open Circle icon only



www.open-circle.org/images/Logo/OpenCircle_icon-square.jpg

NOTES

- You may need to adjust the Open Circle meeting space until you discover a format that works best for your class with social distancing or remote learning restrictions.
- If you are not able to form a circle, consider creating a routine or a symbol that denotes the start of Open Circle time, such as a mindfulness activity or the symbolic placement of an extra chair or an Open Circle sign. If you are able to gather in a circle, paying attention to how you form the circle and being patient will result in a smoother process and more efficient use of time.
- As the year progresses classroom routines may change due to the pandemic. Let children know that Open Circle structure may need to change later in the year but it will still be a safe community space.
- Modify the lesson as needed if your students have already been introduced to Open Circle. If the students have been used to getting into a circle, discuss why it's different this year while also being clear that it is still the safe community space they are used to.

INTRODUCE

Tell students that you will be meeting with them for Open Circle daily for the first 2-3 weeks, then two times a week after that. Ask how many students have participated in Open Circle in the past. Ask what they liked best about Open Circle. Give several students an opportunity to share. Ask how many students have not participated in Open Circle in the past. Ask if they have participated in any type of class meeting. Ask someone to share what was helpful about the class meeting. Tell them that Open Circle will be a time for them to talk about things that are important to them and to learn how to work together and solve problems they might have in school.

PRACTICE

Tell students that since they will be getting into an Open Circle frequently, it is a good idea to make a plan for how they are going to do this in a way that is safe and does not disrupt a nearby class. If you are not able to gather in a circle due to the need for social distancing or if you are teaching in a virtual environment, explain what details will signal to them that Open Circle time is about to begin.

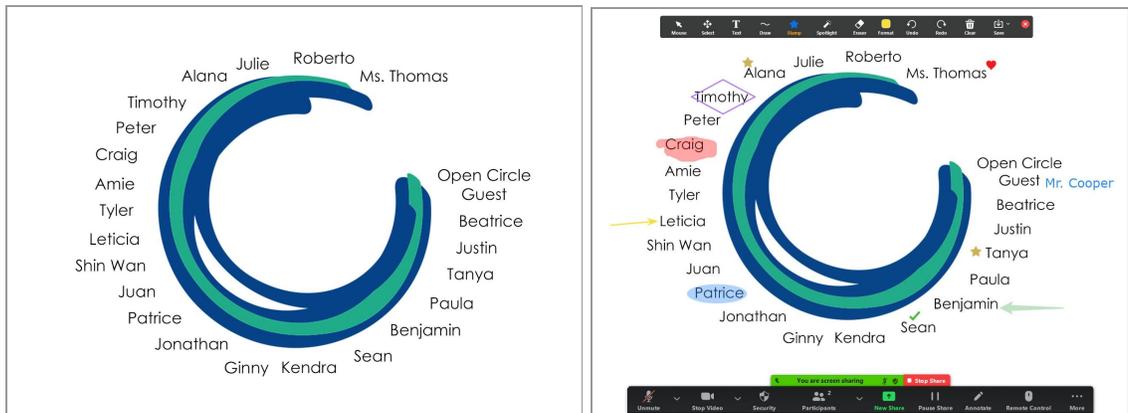
Explain that every classroom is different just as every room in their home is different. Every class is different just as every family is different. In addition, the pandemic is creating different ways of gathering and learning. This is why every year each class makes its own plan for getting into and out of the Open Circle. They may want to think about what worked well in the past and what factors may be different this year as they work on the plan for Open Circle time.

Beginning: The following suggestions will vary based on your teaching environment and if your school has social distancing guidelines that need to be followed:

- Meeting in person in a circle - Ask your students where they think the Open Circle should be, then ask them if anything other than chairs will have to be moved to make a space large enough to accommodate all of them. Next, ask them how the entire group can move to the circle safely. (One after the other cooperatively, or a small group moving followed by another small group, etc.) Ask a student to demonstrate a safe way to carry a chair to the circle. It is helpful to make a diagram of the plan and record students' ideas. Summarize the plan using the words *quietly*, *safely*, and *cooperatively*. Check with students to make sure they understand that cooperatively means "working together."
- Meeting in person remaining in designated seats - Explain to your students that Open Circle time will be different for now due to the need to maintain social distancing and wear masks. Discuss ways you can signal that it will now be Open Circle time, such as placing an extra chair in a designated spot, holding up a sign with the Open Circle logo, or starting the transition with a mindfulness activity.
- Meeting virtually - Explain to students that Open Circle time is going to be different this year because we are meeting online and not able to physically meet in a circle. Discuss ways you can signal that it will now be Open Circle time, such as holding up a sign with the Open Circle logo, sharing an image on the screen to symbolize that it is now Open Circle time (see below), or starting the transition with a mindfulness activity.

Sign-in routine for virtual Open Circle using Zoom annotations

- Create a graphic representation of your Open Circle gathering by putting your students' names around the Open Circle logo. Be sure to leave a space for an Open Circle guest.
- (optional) Let your students use the annotation tool in Zoom to mark their presence in the meeting. They can use the stamp feature, highlighter, arrow, etc. Establish your own classroom rules that work for you, highlighting that, like in-person Open Circle meetings, you want to join the circle *quietly, safely, and cooperatively*.



The Open Circle space: Remind students that an Open Circle is a special kind of circle that has one space left empty. Ask students: *What is the purpose of the empty space? Who is it for?* Explain that the empty space is left for someone who might like to join the circle. An Open Circle always has room for one more person. No one is ever left out. Ask students what this tells a visitor about their class (that everyone is welcome and included). Who might come to the Open Circle to sit in the empty chair? Who came last year?

APPLY

Invite students to put their plan into action. Depending on your milieu, this may be moving to the Open Circle, preparing the extra seat, holding up a sign, singing a song or checking in via a virtual circle. Regardless of how you are moving into your Open Circle meeting, emphasize that it should be done quietly, safely, and cooperatively.

When students are settled in the Open Circle, ask them to think back, or reflect, on what they did well and how they might improve. Share the Reflection mini-poster and have a volunteer read aloud the definition. Tell students that reflection can help us improve the way we do things – like preparing for and starting our Open Circle meetings.

Compliment the class on how they worked together. Tell them that working together or cooperating as a whole class is important and is something they will be doing all year.

HOMEWORK/EXTEND

Send the Home Link newsletter to your students' families. This will help parents and caregivers understand lessons and vocabulary from this curriculum, encourage them to reinforce and practice Open Circle skills at home with their child, and provide them with literature connections related to the lesson topics. The first Home Link newsletter, which gives an overview of the Open Circle Curriculum, is translated into seven languages. To edit the Home Link to include more specific information about what your class is working on, or to send it electronically, you can download the text at www.open-circle.org/homelinks.