

Dear Family:

This year our class is using the *Open Circle Curriculum*, a comprehensive social and emotional learning program that supports elementary school children in developing the skills they need to be successful learners and to form healthy, positive relationships with people throughout their lives.

Twice each week during the whole school year, the class will meet in a circle for about 15 minutes. Lesson topics will include listening well, including one another, cooperating, understanding feelings, teasing, bullying, recognizing differences among people, getting calm, problem solving, positive self-talk, and more. The goals of the lessons are to create a safe, caring and highly engaging classroom environment and to give children the skills they need to succeed academically, solve interpersonal problems and build positive relationships.

You can help your child develop these skills by discussing and practicing them at home. Ask your child to tell you what we talked about in the last Open Circle Meeting or to show you a favorite Open Circle activity. The attached sheet contains some of the vocabulary words that your child will be learning in Open Circle. For more information about Open Circle, please visit www.open-circle.org.

The *Open Circle Curriculum* was developed by Open Circle at the Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, and is available for Kindergarten through Grade 5. All teachers who use Open Circle have received special training to implement the *Open Circle Curriculum* in their classrooms.

If you have any questions about Open Circle, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours truly,

The Open Circle program teaches social and emotional skills that can help children form positive relationships and become successful learners. Here are some examples of the vocabulary words your child is learning in Open Circle lessons at school.

Ally: A person who speaks up or takes action to help someone.

Body Language: A way to express feelings using your face and body.

Brainstorming: Thinking of many ideas.

Bullying Behavior: When one or more people severely or repeatedly harm someone with words or actions.

Bystander: A person who observes a situation and does not speak up or take action.

Calm Breathing: Breathing in and out deeply and slowly in order to feel calm.

Compliment: Saying something about someone that is true, specific and positive.

Cooperate: To work together to get something done.

Dangerous or Destructive Behaviors: Actions that are dangerous (someone might get hurt) or destructive (something might get damaged or broken). When children see dangerous or destructive behavior, they should tell a responsible adult right away.

Nonnegotiable Rules: Rules that cannot be changed.

Nonverbal Signals: A way of communicating without words.

Open Circle Meeting: A time in school for students to learn and practice specific social and emotional skills that will help them form positive relationships and become successful learners.

Positive Leader: A person who does things to help the group and sets a good example.

Positive Self-Talk: Saying encouraging things to yourself.

Problem: A situation that causes someone to feel confused or upset.

Reflection: Pausing and asking yourself questions about an experience.

School Listening Look: A way of listening to others in school by keeping your body calm and looking at the speaker.

Speaking Up: Expressing ideas, feelings, and opinions in a respectful way; looking at the person or group; and speaking slowly, clearly, and loudly enough.

Dear Family:

During our first Open Circle Meetings, the class practiced taking their chairs and getting into a circle quietly, safely, and cooperatively. We form a circle so that everyone can see everyone else and be heard. We always leave one space open in case another person would like to join the circle. Everyone is welcome, and no one is ever left out. The Open Circle symbolizes the idea of an inclusive classroom community. Ask your child to tell you how the class gets into a circle.

Students worked on getting to know each other's names in one Open Circle. In order to be able to work well together, they need to know each other's names and how to pronounce them correctly. Ask your child to say the names of as many people in the class as he/she can remember. I reminded students that when they are learning something new, it is important to take time for reflection. When we reflect, we pause and ask ourselves questions such as, "How am I doing?" or "What did I learn?"

We have been getting to know each other better. In order for students to become friends and work well together, it is important for them to learn about each other. We did an activity called "Stand Up/Sit Down" to find out ways we are the same and ways we are different. Ask your child to tell you what he/she is learning about the students in the class. You might encourage your child to get to know a classmate they do not know very well during recess or lunchtime. We talked about how much we can learn from people who are different from us.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Ada, Alma Flor. *I Love Saturday's y Domingos*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2002.

A little girl loves her two sets of grandparents, each from a different culture. When she spends alternate Saturdays with them, she learns something different from each.

De La Pena, Matt. *Last Stop on Market Street*. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2015.

During a bus ride with his grandmother, CJ notices the many kinds of people who make up his neighborhood.

Kostecki-Shaw, Jenny Sue. *Same, Same, but Different*. Henry Holt and Co., 2011.

Elliot lives in America and Kailash lives in India. As pen pals, they discover the ways they are the same and different from one another.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle, we discussed and developed some **classroom rules** that will help to keep our classroom safe, make it a place where students feel cared about and where we can do our best learning. Students also learned that some rules are nonnegotiable. This means “no choice.” They may ask to have these rules explained, and they may ask questions about them, but they cannot be changed. Ask your child to share with you some of the classroom rules that we developed. Ask for an example of a nonnegotiable rule in our classroom. Talk to your child about any nonnegotiable rules in your home for mealtimes, bedtimes, and responsibilities.

In another Open Circle meeting, we talked about **nonverbal signals**. A nonverbal signal is a way of communicating without using words. We tried out many nonverbal signals that we already know, such as the signals for *okay*, *no*, *great effort*, and *let's be quiet*. We talked about why it might be helpful to have some nonverbal signals in the classroom that everyone agrees to and is clear about. The class chose several nonverbal signals that we agreed to use this year in the classroom. Ask your child to demonstrate these signals. Ask your child to demonstrate some other nonverbal signals and have you guess what they mean. You and your child might want to develop your own nonverbal signals to use at home

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Henkes, Kevin. *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. Greenwillow Books, 1996.

Lilly learns the hard way that she has to follow the classroom rules and wait for “sharing time” to talk about her new purse.

Levine, Ellen. *I Hate English!* Cartwheel Books, 1995.

When her family moves to New York from Hong Kong, Mei Mei finds it difficult to adjust to school and learn the alien sounds of English. She does, however, understand most of the nonverbal signals that people around her use.

Dear Family:

In a recent Open Circle lesson, we talked about what it feels like to **be calm** and we learned two calm breathing techniques to help us get calm. One is called the balloon technique:

- Breathe in slowly and deeply, filling your belly with air like a balloon.
- Breathe out slowly.

We also learned the counting technique:

- Breathe in and count to yourself up to four.
- Breathe out slowly, counting to four or more.

Ask your child to teach you the two calm breathing techniques he/she learned in school. Encourage your child to use one of the techniques whenever he/she needs to calm down.

In another Open Circle Meeting we learned the **school listening look**. The school listening look refers to expectations for listening at school. The school listening look means:

- keep our bodies calm
- look at the person who is speaking.
- ask questions and make respectful comments.

It is important to everyone in the class – students, teachers and visitors – to be listened to when they speak.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Krishnaswami, Uma. *The Happiest Tree: a Yoga Story*. Lee & Low, 2005.

Learning Yoga helps Meena stay calm and focused during the class play.

Kelley, True. *The Blabber Report*. Dutton Children's Books, 2007.

Sharing his book report with an audience is easier because Blabber Mouse's classmates use their best listening skills.

Dear Family:

In a recent Open Circle Meeting, we talked about **recognizing and naming our feelings**. Everyone has feelings. Some feelings make us feel good and some make us feel not so good. We made a list of many feeling words, such as excited, happy, sad, surprised, and angry, and we talked about what might happen to make us feel that way.

Ask your child to name as many feeling words as he/she can remember. Use words at home to name how you and other family members are feeling.

Body language was the topic of another recent Open Circle lesson. Body language is a way of expressing feelings with our faces or bodies instead of using words. We practiced using body language to express different feelings, such as excitement, anger, and surprise. Body language helps us to understand how people are feeling if they are not telling us with words.

Point out examples of body language that you see in books or media and discuss what you think the gestures and facial expressions might mean.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Brown, Tameka Fryer. *My Cold Plum, Lemon Pie, Bluesy Mood*. Viking Books for Young Readers, 2013.

Jamie recognizes and names many different feelings in a creative way.

Raschka, Chris. *Yo! Yes?* Scholastic, Inc., 1993.

Two boys communicate using body language and very few words.

Soto, Gary. *Too Many Tamales*. Puffin Books, 1996.

Maria experiences a range of feelings as she prepares a holiday meal with her family.

Dear Family:

In a recent Open Circle Meeting, we talked about ways to **get calm when you feel upset**. We discussed what happens in our bodies and brains when we feel strong emotions. We learned how different parts of the brain, such as the frontal cortex and the amygdala, control how we feel, think and act. When we are upset, it is difficult to think clearly. We learned that calm-breathing techniques can help us calm down. Spending time with people who care about us also helps us feel calm. Calming down helps us think and make decisions.

Positive self-talk was the topic of another Open Circle lesson. Positive self-talk is saying encouraging things to yourself. Positive self-talk helps us to try harder and not give up. We can all do things that seem hard at first if we remind ourselves to keep trying and not give up. At school, we can use positive self-talk to encourage ourselves to do our best on a test or in a game, or to try something new.

At home, ask your child to explain to you what positive self-talk is and give you an example. Encourage your child to use positive self-talk when he/she seems discouraged about learning or trying something new.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check it out at the library and read with your child:

Kostecki-Shaw, *Jenny Sue. My Travelin' Eye*. Henry Holt, 2008.

Jenny Sue thinks about her “travelin’ eye” as something that helps her “see the world in a different way.” Whether she has to wear a patch, or glasses, she puts a positive spin on the situation.

Pilkey, Dav. *Paperboy*. Orchard Books, 1999.

Delivering newspapers early every morning takes discipline, commitment, and a positive attitude.

Dear Family:

At another Open Circle Meeting, we talked about **giving and receiving compliments**. A compliment is saying something about someone that is true, positive and specific, such as something they do well or something they did that was helpful. Giving compliments in a classroom community is important because it makes others feel noticed and appreciated. Getting a compliment is similar to getting a gift. We learned that when you receive a compliment, you should say, “Thank you!”

The topic of one of our recent Open Circle lessons was **including one another**. We talked about how it feels to be left out and discussed some ways to include others at recess, during free play time at school, and in the classroom. Perhaps you could share with your child a time when you were left out and how it made you feel. Ask your child if he/she has ever been excluded or noticed that other children were left out. Encourage your child to find ways to include children who want to join in an activity or a group at play.

In another Open Circle, we talked about **cooperating**, or working together to get something done. We discussed what we can do to cooperate in the classroom, on the playground, in the lunchroom, and at other times during the day at school. We also talked about why it is important to cooperate and what can be hard about cooperating. Ask your child what he/she does to cooperate with his/her classmates at school. Find opportunities at home for your child to cooperate to get something done, and compliment him/her on good cooperation. Encourage your child to cooperate with other children in activities and groups outside of school.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

McNamara, Margaret. *How Many Seeds in a Pumpkin?* Schwartz and Wade Books, 2007.

Class members cooperate as they work on a project to estimate how many seeds are contained in different sized pumpkins.

Torres, Leyla. *Subway Sparrow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.

When a sparrow becomes trapped in a subway car, the passengers work together to free the helpless bird.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle we learned about **speaking up**. In order for people to hear what you have to say at school, it's important to be able to speak up. We learned some skills to help us speak up:

Look at the person or group.

Speak slowly, clearly and loudly enough

Express ideas, feelings, and opinions in a respectful way.

At home, ask your child to use the speaking-up skills to tell you about his/her day in school. Compliment your child on using these new skills.

In another Open Circle Meeting we talked about **expressing angry feelings**. We talked about some ways to express anger in a way that is not hurtful to others. One way is to calm down and then use words instead of actions to express angry feelings. We reviewed some calm-breathing techniques that we have learned.

At home, talk to your child about expressing angry feelings. Encourage your child to use words that are not hurtful, rather than actions to express his/her anger.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Harper, Charise Mericle. *When Randolph Turned Rotten*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2007.
Randolph's angry feelings are overwhelming to him when he is left out.

Rappaport, Doreen. *Martin's Big Words*. Jump at the Sun, 2007.

Dr. Martin Luther King used his "big words" and his powerful speaking up skills to advance the cause of desegregation in the United States.

Silver, Gail. *Ahn's Anger*. Plum Blossom Books, 2009.

Ahn's grandfather teaches him that calm breathing is one way to manage strong emotions, like anger.

Vail, Rachel. *Sometimes I'm Bombaloo*. Scholastic Press, 2001.

Katie describes how scary it is to feel "Bombaloo," or not listening or behaving well.

Dear Family:

Our recent Open Circle lessons have focused on helping students to understand the situations in school that require the help of a teacher or another responsible adult. We learned to identify behaviors that are **dangerous** (someone might get hurt) or **destructive** (something might get broken, or damaged; mean teasing or bullying). It is always important for a student to tell a teacher or other adult when they observe a dangerous or destructive behavior in school. For example, when a classmate is tapping a pencil, this is not a dangerous or destructive behavior. However, when a child picks up broken glass on the playground, that is a dangerous or destructive behavior and students who observe this action should tell an adult right away.

We also talked about some ways students themselves can begin to respond to behavior that is **annoying** but is not dangerous or destructive behavior. One way is to use words. For example, a student might say, “I don’t like it when you make humming noises because I can’t hear the teacher. Please stop.” Students were assured that they can always come to an adult for help if they cannot deal with a situation on their own.

At home, try to help your child sort behaviors and what to do about them. Ask your child, “Is that a dangerous or destructive behavior?” If it is, compliment him/her on telling an adult. If it is not a dangerous or destructive behavior, help your child figure out how to handle the situation with words. You also might work with your child to identify responsible adults at places he/she frequently goes outside of school and home whom he/she would be able to tell about a dangerous or destructive behavior.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Elliott, Laura Malone. *Hunter’s Best Friend at School*. HarperCollins, 2002.

Hunter and Stripe are best friends, but sometimes Stripe’s behavior is annoying. Hunter helps Stripe be “his best self” by suggesting and modeling positive behavior.

Rathmann, Peggy. *Ruby the Copycat*. Scholastic, 2006.

Angela feels annoyed when Ruby starts copying everything Angela wears, says, and does. Ruby finally discovers her own special talent, and students start to copy her.

Shannon, David. *David Goes to School*. Blue Sky Press, 1999.

When David first goes to school, he has trouble following all the new rules. Sometimes his behavior is annoying to others, and other times it is dangerous and destructive.

Dear Family:

Teasing was the topic of a recent Open Circle lesson. We talked about how it feels to be teased and how to help someone who is being teased. If you do not like to be teased, you can try using words to tell the person to stop. Students were reminded that mean teasing and bullying are dangerous and destructive behaviors and should be reported to an adult right away. Students were encouraged not to tease others if they can see that the person being teased does not like it.

At home, talk to your child about being teased and teasing others. Discuss some ways your child can help people who are being teased. Encourage your child to pay attention to the feelings of other children.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Bruchac, Joseph. *How Chipmunk Got His Stripes*. Puffin, 2003.

This version of a Native American tale tells how a squirrel learns a hard lesson about teasing. When Squirrel continues to tease even after Bear shows that he doesn't like it, Bear lashes out.

Saltzberg, Barney. *Crazy Hair Day*. Candlewick Press, 2003.

When Larry teases his friend, Stanley, about his hair, the whole class gets involved in making Stanley feel better.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle this week, we began a multi-lesson unit on problem solving. In the coming weeks, we will be learning to use a six-step process for solving people problems. We began by talking about what a problem is. A problem is any situation that causes someone to be upset or confused. We made a list of problems that students in our grade might have, such as problems on the way to school, at recess or with friends.

To help us learn and remember the problem-solving steps, we use the colors of a traffic signal: Red = Stop. Yellow = Think. Green = Go.

RED reminds us to STOP.

1. Calm down.
2. Identify the problem.

YELLOW reminds us to THINK:

3. Decide on a positive goal.
4. Think of several solutions.
5. Evaluate solutions.

GREEN tells us to GO:

6. Make a plan and try it.

The six problem-solving steps are printed on the back of this sheet. Please post it somewhere in your home where you can see it often as a reminder to both you and your child to use the problem-solving process to solve problems that come up outside of school. Problem solving is an important skill that your child can use not only in school, but later on in the workplace and the community.

Yours truly,

Dear Family:

In Open Circle, we are continuing to learn and practice each of the six steps of problem solving: Calm down. Identify the problem. Decide on a positive goal. Think of several solutions. Evaluate the solutions. Make a plan and try it.

Before we can begin to solve a problem, we need to **calm down**. We discussed in Open Circle some ways to calm down, such as using calm breathing techniques.

We also talked about the second problem-solving step: **Identify the problem**. It's important to be able to use words to say how you feel and why. One way to put a problem into words is to say, "I feel ____ because ____." For example, "I feel frustrated because my friend did not play with me at recess." Or, "I feel mad because someone borrowed my markers without asking me." Saying how you feel and why helps you to solve the problem.

In this *Open Circle Home Link* and in the next several *Home Links*, there will be a list of books that deal with problem solving and are appropriate for your child's grade level. You might want to check out a few from the library and read them with your child. While you're reading together, talk about how the characters in the books solve their problems. Do they follow some of the problem-solving steps that we use in Open Circle? Meanwhile, continue to use problem solving at home with your child.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Costello, David. *I Can Help*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.

Animal friends deal with a variety of problems.

Elliott, Laura Malone. *Hunter's Best Friend at School*. HarperCollins, 2002.

Hunter figures out how to help his best friend, Stripe, who is annoying everyone at school.

Havill, Juanita. *Jamaica's Find*. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

When Jamaica finds a stuffed bear on the playground, she must decide whether to keep it or find its rightful owner.

Dear Family:

Our lessons in Open Circle continue to focus on each of the six steps of problem solving: Calm down. Identify the problem. Decide on a positive goal. Think of several solutions. Evaluate the solutions. Make a plan and try it.

Recently, we learned and practiced the third step of problem solving: **Decide on a positive goal**. This means that we decide what the best ending would be, what we would like to see happen, or how we would like the problem to end up. In order to be positive, the goal must be safe and considerate of others.

In another Open Circle Meeting, we practiced the fourth step of problem solving: **Think of several solutions**. Thinking of many ideas is called **brainstorming**, and there are two rules for brainstorming at school:

- Think of many ideas.
- Don't judge any of the ideas or comment on them until the brainstorming is finished.

At home, practice the problem-solving steps with your child as often as you can. Check out of the library a few more of the books on problem solving listed below. As you read together, talk about how the characters are using the problem-solving steps. Are they deciding on a positive goal and thinking of many solutions?

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Coffelt, Nancy. *Fred Stays with Me*. Little Brown, 2007.

A little girl doesn't have much control over her parents' divorce, but she has a plan for solving the problem of how and when she gets to be with her dog.

deGroat, Diane. *Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire*. Seastar Books, 2003.

Gilbert is nervous about playing George Washington in a school play. To prepare for his performance, he "borrows" part of his costume to take home and then lies about it. He must figure out a way to solve his problem of being caught in a lie.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle, we are continuing to work on each of the six steps of problem solving: Calm down. Identify the problem. Decide on a positive goal. Think of several solutions. Evaluate the solutions. Make a plan and try it.

In the past few Open Circles, our lessons have focused on the last two steps. After we think of many possible solutions to a problem, it's important to **evaluate the solutions**. We must ask, "What would happen if I tried this?" about each of our possible solutions. Also, we must ask, "Which of the solutions would be most likely to get me to a positive goal?" Sometimes our first idea is not the best idea. When we evaluate the possible solutions, it is like obeying the yellow light in the traffic signal, which tells us to WAIT and be careful before we act.

Part of **making a plan** is to choose one solution to try, and another solution to use if the first one doesn't work. When we make a plan for trying a solution, we think about who will be involved, what will we say or do, how will we say or do it, where and when will we try the plan. If the solution doesn't work, we should change part of the plan or try our back-up solution.

At home, continue to practice the six problem-solving steps as often as possible. Go to the library and check out some of the books below that relate to problem solving. Read them with your child and talk about the steps the characters use to solve their problems.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to the topics we discussed in Open Circle. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Watt, Melanie. *Scaredy Squirrel makes a Friend*. Kids Can Press, 2007.

When Squirrel feels nervous about trying to make a new friend, he comes up with very detailed plans to solve his problem.

Williams, Vera B. *A Chair for my Mother*. Greenwillow Books, 1982.

A child, her waitress mother, and her grandmother lose all their furniture in a fire and must find a way to buy a comfortable armchair.

Dear Family:

In our last lesson on problem solving, we focused on practicing what we have learned in this unit. We took a problem and went through all six steps to try to solve it: Calm down. Identify the problem. Decide on a positive goal. Think of several solutions. Evaluate the solutions. Make a plan and try it.

At home, try to use the six-step problem-solving process with your child often so that it becomes automatic. Be a role model for your child by using the steps to solve problems you encounter at home, at work, or in the neighborhood. Compliment your child whenever he/she uses the six steps to solve problems.

In another Open Circle Meeting, we talked about what it means to be a **positive leader**. A positive leader is someone who does things to help a group, and sets a good example for others. Students thought about classmates and adults at school who show traits of positive leader. We also discussed how positive leaders in our class use the problem-solving steps to address problem situations.

Yours truly,

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Here are some books that relate to problem solving. You might want to check out one or two at the library and read with your child:

Lionni, Leo. *Swimmy*. Pantheon Books, 1963.

A school of red fish has a problem, and a little black fish has a way to solve it.

Waber, Bernard. *Ira Sleeps Over*. Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

Ira is invited to spend the night at a friend's house. Should he bring his teddy bear? Will others tease him about it?

Dear Family:

In our final Open Circle Meeting of the year, we took time to reflect on this school year and our experiences in Open Circle. We talked about what we liked most about school this year and some things we have learned. We also talked about the skills we have learned in Open Circle and how they have helped us in the classroom, on the playground, and in other places.

Ask your child what he/she has liked best about coming together in Open Circle this year. Ask what he/she has learned in Open Circle that has helped him/her the most. During the summer and beyond, continue to use the vocabulary and skills your child has learned in Open Circle. Keep the problem-solving steps close by, and continue to practice them with your child. Thank you for the support you have given to Open Circle this year by reinforcing at home what your child has learned at school.

Yours truly,