

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](http://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.

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:

Cisneros, Sandra. *Hairs/Pelitos*. Dragonfly, 1997.

A bilingual story that serves as a family portrait. Different hair styles and textures of the family members receive special attention.

Henkes, Kevin. *Chrysanthemum*. Greenwillow Books, 1991.

A story about celebrating one's name, even if it sounds unusual to others.

Katz, Karen. *The Colors of Us*. Square Fish, 2002.

A little girl realizes that she will need more colors to draw all the people in her life.

Walsh, Melanie. *My Nose, Your Nose*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

In very simple language, the author points out that, although people have many differences, they have many things in common.

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:

Cheng, Andrea. *Grandfather Counts*. Lee & Low Books, 2003.

Helen and her grandfather use nonverbal signals to communicate with each other until they learn each other’s languages.

Yolen, Jane. *How Do Dinosaurs Go to School?* Blue Sky Press, 2007.

A very unusual student has to learn some basic classroom rules.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle, 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 flower technique:

Breathe in through your nose, imagining the fragrance of a sweet-smelling flower.

Breathe out with an “ahhh” sound.

Each person has his/her own way of calming down. However, when strong feelings and signals in our body tell us that we’re losing control, the first thing to do is to stop and take some calm breaths. Ask your child to teach you the two calm breathing techniques he/she learned in school. Practice them together. Talk about times he/she might want to use them to calm down. Make a habit of using calm breathing yourself.

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

Keep our bodies calm

Look at the person who is speaking.

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:

Lester, Helen. *Listen Buddy*. Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

Buddy’s poor listening habits get him into big trouble. After his encounter with the dreaded Scruffy Varmint, Buddy tries harder to pay attention to what his parents say.

MacLean, Kerry Lee. *Peaceful Piggy Meditation*. Albert Whitman, 2004.

Humorous pig characters demonstrate how important it is to use calm breathing in order to think clearly during stressful situations.

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 communicating 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:

Kachenmeister, Cheryl. *On Monday When it Rained*. Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Different scenarios illustrated by photographs describe one boy's different emotions over a period of seven days.

Menchin, Scott. *Taking a Bath with a Dog*. Candlewick, 2007.

A little girl asks a variety of characters what makes them happy, and then she comes up with her own list of positive thoughts.

Rotner, Shelley. *Lots of Feelings*. Millbrook Press, 2003.

Close-up photographs of children's faces illustrate a range of emotions.

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 them out at the library and read them with your child:

Dean, James. *Pete the Cat and his Magic Sunglasses*. Harper Collins, 2013.

Pete the cat discovers that he doesn't need his magic sunglasses to see the positive side of life events.

Piper, Watty. *The Little Engine That Could*. Scholastic, Inc., 1979.

Positive thinking and persistence result in overcoming a seemingly impossible task.

Original source of the familiar phrase, "I think I can, I think I can."

Dear Family:

At another Open Circle Meeting, we talked about giving and **receiving compliments**. A compliment is saying something good about someone, 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. We did some role plays about finding ways to include others. 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:

Davis, Aubrey. *The Enormous Potato*. Kids Can Press, 1998.

A farmer grows an enormous potato that is too large for one person to pull out of the ground. The farmer asks his wife, his daughter, his dog, and his cat to help him harvest the potato. With cooperative tugging, the potato comes out!

Forest, Heather. *The Little Red Hen: An Old Fable*. August House, 2006.

Red Hen would like some help with her baking. When she asks who will pitch in, she hears “Not I!” from Dog, Cat, and Mouse, who are all too busy to participate in the baking project.

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 and clearly

Say it loudly enough.

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 made a list of some things that make us angry. Everyone feels angry at times. It is important to learn ways to express anger in a way that is not hurtful to others. One way to deal with anger 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. Share with your child some situations that make you angry and some ways you express anger. Ask your child how he/she expresses anger. Encourage your child to always 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:

Button, Lana. *Willow's Whispers*. Kids Can Press, Ltd., 2010.

Willow has trouble speaking up in school, which leads to one misunderstanding after another. Ultimately she finds a way to make herself heard.

Lester, Helen. *Hooway for Wodney Wat*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Rodney Rat speaks up once he gains some confidence.

Haan, Amanda. *I Call My Hand Gentle*. Viking, 2003.

Hands can do many things, including protect, hug, throw, build. Most importantly, hands can be gentle, even when you feel upset.

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 not listening to the teacher, this is not a dangerous or destructive behavior. However, when a child runs around with a pair of scissors, 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 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:

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.

Sometimes David's behavior is annoying to others, and other times it is dangerous or 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:

Henkes, Kevin. *Chrysanthemum*. Greenwillow Books, 1991.

Chrysanthemum loves her name, until she starts going to school and the other children make fun of it.

Waber, Bernard. *Ira Sleeps Over*. Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

Ira's older sister teases Ira about bringing his teddy bear to his first away-from-home sleep over.

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 process to help us think about problems. We began by talking about what a problem is. A problem is something that causes us to feel confused or upset. We all have problems at school — in the classroom and on the playground. We also have problems as a whole class.

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

## **RED LIGHT**

First, we have to STOP.

In problem solving, that means we have to calm down. Then we tell ourselves how we feel and why.

## **YELLOW LIGHT**

Second, we have to THINK.

In problem solving, that means we have to be careful and think of many different ways to solve the problem and what would happen if we tried them.

## **GREEN LIGHT**

Third, we can GO.

In problem solving, that means we choose an idea, make a plan and try it.

The problem-solving traffic signal is printed on the back of this sheet. Please post it on your refrigerator or someplace in your home where you can see it often as a reminder to both you and your child to practice the problem-solving. 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 the problem-solving steps that correspond to a traffic signal. Red = Stop. Yellow = Think. Green = Go.

Recently we talked about the red light steps. First, before we can solve a problem, we need to **calm down**. We discussed several ways to calm down, including the balloon technique and the flower breathing. Then we discussed the importance of being 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 upset because someone knocked over the block tower I was building.” Saying how you feel and why helps you to solve the problem.

Following is a list of books that deal with problem solving. You might want to get a few from the library and read them with your child. While you’re reading, talk with your child about how the characters in the books solve their problems. Do they follow the problem-solving steps that we use in Open Circle? Have your child suggest other ways that the character could have solved the problem.

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:

We're continuing to learn and practice the steps of problem solving in Open Circle. The problem-solving steps correspond to the lights on a traffic signal. Red = Stop. Yellow = Think. Green = Go.

We talked about the yellow light steps. First, think of many ideas that might solve the problem. This is called brainstorming. When we brainstorm in class, we think of as many ideas as we can, and we do not say if we like an idea or if it is a good or bad idea until all the ideas have been said.

After we have brainstormed many ideas, we go on to the next problem-solving step: think of what might happen next if you tried an idea. For each possible solution, we need to ask if it would be safe and thoughtful to others. In our discussion, we discovered that people have many different ideas for how to solve a problem.

At home, continue to use the problem-solving process with your child. You might also get a few of the following books on problem solving from the library read with your child. As you read, discuss how the characters solve their problems. Do they think of many ideas? Do they think about what might happen next if they tried each idea?

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:

Katz, Avner. *Tortoise Solves a Problem*. Willa Perlman Books, 1993.

Tortoise follows the problem-solving steps to figure out how to design a house for his fellow tortoises.

Koster, Gloria. *The Peanut-Free Café*. Albert Whitman & Co., 2006.

Grant, a new student at the Nutley School, must eat at a table by himself in the cafeteria because he is allergic to peanut butter. The Nutley School community tries to find a way to make him feel included.

Poydar, Nancy. *Zip, Zip...Homework*. Holiday House, 2008.

Violet's excitement about her new backpack turns into anxiety about losing her homework. She learns a tough lesson about telling the truth.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle, we are learning and practicing more problem-solving steps. The problem-solving steps correspond to the lights on a traffic signal. Red = Stop. Yellow = Think. Green = Go.

Recently, we talked about the green light step: **Make a plan and try it.** After we calm down, say the problem in words, think of many different ways to solve it, and think of what might happen next if we tried each idea, then it's time to choose one of the ideas, make a plan, and try it. Making a plan means answering questions such as: Who will I talk to? What will I say or do? When will I say or do it?

We talked about what might happen if we try a solution and it doesn't work. We could try a different solution, try to figure out why it didn't work, or ask for help. In problem solving, it's important not to give up.

At home, practice the problem-solving process with your child as often as you can. You might also check out a few of the following books connected to problem solving from the library to read 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:

Keller, Holly. *That's Mine, Horace*. Greenwillow Books, 2000.

Horace finds and keeps a toy racing car, and then he feels terrible about it. His friend, the owner of the toy car, helps Horace do the right thing.

Kelley, True. *Blabber Mouse*. Dutton Children's Books, 2001.

When a mouse can't stop gossiping, his friends come up with a way to solve the "Blabber Mouse" problem.

Dear Family:

In Open Circle, we concluded our unit on problem solving by practicing the problem solving process. We used some typical problem situations that come up in kindergarten.

### **RED LIGHT = STOP**

Calm down.

Tell yourself: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

### **YELLOW LIGHT = THINK**

Think of many ideas.

Think of what would happen if you tried each one.

### **GREEN LIGHT = GO**

Choose an idea. Make a plan and try it.

At home, try to **practice the 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 your own everyday problems that come up at home. Compliment your child whenever he/she uses the problem-solving steps.

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 and positive leadership. 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 steps up as a positive leader to help the group.

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 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,