Successful circle times

Make your circle times successful by following the tips listed below:

Make circle time short and extend the time over the course of the year.

While some groups are ready for circle time, others just can’t sit still. Circle time is not mandatory. You may want to wait a few months, and use only informal small group activities like book readings to help move children to readiness. Try circle time again as children mature.

You can start out very short. One active song can be a great circle time for the youngest of children or a very active group of older children. You can increase the length of time as the group shows that it is ready for more. Usually five to ten minutes is a good length for a circle time. Rarely will a twenty-minute circle time be successful, but the only way to judge the appropriate length is how the group reacts. As children grow you may be able to comfortably extend the time.

Find a creative way to invite children to circle time.

Develop your own way to invite the children to circle time. One child care provider plays a drum beat and everyone comes running. Another caregiver begins a simple hand-clapping rhythm and the children are drawn over to join in. Others sing a song. Find what you like and what makes the children excited to join the circle.

Learn transitions to move the event along.

A few transition songs, chants, or games will help you make your circle time smooth. There are good transition songs that get the children to move from sitting to standing and vice versa. You may also want to use a transition song to end your circle time.

Find activities that allow children to participate.

Children enjoy circle time more and behave much better if they have ways to participate rather than demand that they simply sit and listen. Give the children a role in the story you are reading. You might say, “Listen carefully and clap your hands when we come to the part about the thunderstorm in the story.” Consider the children to be your sound effects experts when you read them a story. It really brings the magic of storytelling alive.

Children need to move their large and small muscles.

Keep circle time active. Do exercises in place, jump or turn around in a circle. One caregiver made a big die from two old milk cartons and wrote exercise words such as jumping and hopping on each side. She asks one child to roll the die each day. If it is the 12th of the month, they do that exercise 12 times. This is one great way to keep both the children and you healthy and strong.
Great circle times are musical.

Give your circle time some zing by using simple percussion musical instruments to help keep the children’s attention. Make a simple shaker and use it to make the sound of the rain when you read a story to the children. Drums are wonderful for signaling the end and beginning of a story. Sing, sing, sing. Don’t worry about your voice. More important than singing in key is sharing the song with the children.

Use circle time to present new ideas.

Some caregivers use circle time to build children’s problem-solving abilities. They teach the children to solve their own problems through a process called conflict resolution. When children have a problem getting along during free play, the caregiver doesn’t solve the problem for them; instead the children are asked to speak to each other about the problem and try to work out a solution that is agreeable to everyone involved. Even three-year-olds can work out some of their own problems. The learning is extended at circle time by acting out real problems that the children have had on that day. Simple puppets can be used to act out a problem and then either share the solution the children have found or ask the group to share their ideas. Either way, the children are learning from the solutions that other children have found to work.

Circle time can be a place to discuss problems.

Older preschoolers are capable of using circle time to work out real problems in the classroom. One child care practitioner asked the children to talk about the problem of pushing that regularly happened when they were going outside for playtime. The children came up with some new rules and the caregivers wrote these rules down for the group. The rules were not all that different from the rules you might come up with, but since the children did it themselves they remembered and followed the new rules more easily.

Make sure you pick a straightforward problem that is not overwhelming for the children. Help the children listen to each other’s ideas. Sometimes they find new and original solutions.

Show-and-tell

Sometimes show-and-tell can make children who are not getting fancy new toys feel deprived. But there is value in giving children a chance to talk with others during circle time. One simple solution for older preschoolers is the game of Mystery Bag.

Buy an inexpensive medium-size tote bag at the craft store and decorate it with paint. Give each child a turn to take the bag home and bring in an object from home that is not a toy. Children then need to ask questions to the child who has brought the object, like a game of twenty questions. This is great language skills practice. Children get practice asking questions and have to remember what has been asked already. The child who has brought the article in has to answer the questions. This mystery bag is a popular activity that avoids the showing off of expensive new toys and the envy and materialism they generate.