

Circle Time Fun

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Circle time means different things to different early childhood educators and centers. For some, just hearing the words, “circle time”, brings thoughts of fear, confusion, and anxiety. Others see circle time as a time of structured, teacher-directed lessons with expectations of children quietly sitting and listening attentively. In reality, when presented as a developmentally appropriate large group activity, circle time has the potential to be the favorite time of day for teachers and children. Canney and Byrne (2006) define circle time as, “activities aimed at developing participants’ awareness of themselves and of others; raising self-esteem; and promoting mutual trust, listening skills, and positive interpersonal behaviors” (p. 20). Circle time engages children in socially mediated learning that supports both cognitive and social/emotional development (Canney & Byrne, 2006). The work of Vygotsky and Piaget support the view that children learn by experiencing and interacting with their social and physical environments, which is exactly what is taking place during a well-planned, developmentally appropriate circle time (Lown, 2002).

Unfortunately, many preschool teachers perceive circle time as an opportunity for validating their ability to instruct a class as they would an elementary school classroom (Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011). Truly understanding developmentally appropriate curricula, behaviors, and practices presents one of the biggest challenges to early childhood educators. Without a solid grasp of early childhood development, circle time becomes an extended period of teacher-directed instruction with little consideration for what actually interests the children or what is developmentally appropriate. This flawed view leads to most children having a general dislike of circle time because it seems to last too long (Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011). In contrast, by capitalizing on the children’s interests and becoming knowledgeable of developmentally appropriate large group activities, intentional teachers have the ability to construct stimulating activities that engage children in the learning process, making circle time fun for everyone (Stephens, 1996; Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011). “Teachers must understand the science of child development as well as master the art of nurturing that development” (Stephens, 1996, p. 41). Armed with knowledge, teachers are then ready to experiment through trial and error, gaining the vital experience that gradually evolves into finely honed circle time implementation.

There is no one, predefined method of conducting a successful, fun circle time because each class of children is unique. However, Stephens (1996) suggests considering the following guidelines for creating effective and engaging circle times:

- Base circle time activities on observations of children’s play and conversations
- Set the stage for appropriate behavior (keep it simple)
- Take advantage of children’s love of and need for rituals and routines
- Work cooperatively with co-teachers and volunteers
- Clearly communicate expectations for participation
- Let children influence circle time experiences
- Be creative in capturing children’s attention
- Plan for “learning by doing” (active participation)
- Include a variety of curriculum areas for integrated learning
- Set a pace and rhythm for circle time (pp. 41-43)

A discussion of developmentally appropriate circle times would not be complete without addressing the issue of calendar activities. Regrettably, many early childhood centers and teachers regard calendar activities as the sole purpose for circle time with young children. Having children repeatedly recite the months of the year and the days of the week is nothing more than rote memorization. Expecting a child to understand that yesterday was Sunday, today is Monday, and tomorrow is Tuesday is not only unrealistic, it is developmentally inappropriate. Research in early childhood development indicates that calendar activities denoting extended periods of time (a month, a week) have little meaning to children below first grade (Beneke, Ostrosky, & Katz, 2008). Young children have a simpler view of time (temporal understanding). In fact, Beneke, Ostrosky, and Katz (2008) state that “there are some temporal concepts that preschoolers can grasp in the context of their daily activities – concepts such as later, before, and after” (p. 13). For example, young children often talk about events that have happened or will happen but not in terms of units of time - hours, days, weeks – or sequence (Beneke, Ostrosky, & Katz, 2008). Consider a child who excitedly tells you it is almost his birthday, when in reality, his birthday is months away. This child understands that his birthday will happen but not in terms of units of time, in this case, months until his birthday. Using the calendar requires an understanding of relative measurements of time for past/future events from the present in addition to the basic concepts of before and after (Friedman, 2000). The ability to comprehend relative time measurements – dates and calendars – comes with maturity so that understanding not present in younger children (3-5 year-olds) is typically present in older children (7-10 year-olds) (Freidman, 2000). “Teachers who intend to keep calendar a part of their daily classroom routine will be more effective if they develop ways to incorporate the calendar that require little time and reflect young children’s limited development of time concepts” (Beneke, Ostrosky, & Katz, 2008, p. 16).

Considerations for a fun, developmentally appropriate Circle Time

- Schedule Circle Time after some type of active play
- Transition to/from Circle Time
 - ✓ Have a consistent transition - simple song, movement, guessing game, activity to signal the start/end of Circle Time
 1. Hello How Are You? (originally from Dr. Jean – “Sings Silly Songs”)
 2. Circle Up (Kathie Hill Music – Songs and Chants for Antsy Pants)
 3. Come and Sing (Kathie Hill Music – Songs and Chants for Antsy Pants)
 4. To Table Time (Kathie Hill Music – Songs and Chants for Antsy Pants)
 5. On the Floor (Kathie Hill Music – Songs and Chants for Antsy Pants)
 6. Come Back (Kathie Hill Music – Songs and Chants for Antsy Pants)
 7. Surprise Sack (Dr. Jean – “All Day Long”)
 8. Give Me a Clap (Dr. Jean – “All Day Long”)
 9. These Are My Glasses (Laurie Berkner – “Whaddya Think of That”)
 - ✓ Choose an activity/song that includes each child’s name to start Circle Time
 1. Tick-a-Tacka
 2. Who’s That Underneath That Hat
 3. Flippity Dippity Fluttery Flee
 4. I Wish I Had a Little Red Box (Dr. Jean – “All Day Long”)
- Set the stage
 - ✓ Mark area on the floor so children know where to sit – use tape, carpet squares, bean bags, poly-dots, etc.
 - ✓ Sit so you can see all the children and they can see you and your props
 - ✓ Have Circle Time area away from high traffic areas (these are distractions)
 - ✓ Communicate expectations for participation – sit on bottoms (or tummies, whatever you have decided), take turns talking, everyone gets a turn
- Keep the length of time developmentally appropriate
 - ✓ Toddlers: 5-10 minutes
 - ✓ Preschoolers: 10-15 minutes
- Vary activities used during Circle Time to keep children excited, motivated, and engaged. Allow children to participate in the activities (not completely teacher-directed) by keeping it hands-on.

- ✓ Focus on what interests your children based on your observations throughout the school day
 1. Bring an item from home
 2. Show-and-Tell
- ✓ Touch on various developmental areas throughout the week/month to help children hone current skills and scaffold to new ones
 1. Motor development
 2. Letters (Monster, Monster Munch, Munch, Munch)
 3. Colors
 4. Rhyming games (on a separate paper)
 1. Five Little Monkeys
 2. Hickory Dickory Doc
 3. Little Miss Muffet
 5. Jack in the Box (Just For Kids Premium on iTunes)
 6. Here's My Friend

Here's my friend!
 (Melissa) is her name.
 Time to put her
 In the game!
 (M) is her letter number one.
 Now keep the beat for the rest of the fun!
 Shhhh! Me-lis-sa! Me-lis-sa! Me-lis-sa!
 BOOM! Me-lis-sa! Me-lis-sa! Me-lis-sa!
 Oh brother,
 Time for another!

- ✓ Integrate learning across curriculum/domain areas (math, science, literacy, social/emotional)
 1. Introduce centers
 2. Science Experiments
 3. Math Games
- ✓ Bring multiple items to Circle Time and let the children choose what to do (i.e. two books, several cards with songs or finger plays and children select from a pile)
- ✓ Storytelling – be excited and enthusiastic, vary tone of voice, use props

1. Use Shared Reading strategies
 2. The Hungry Thing by Jan Slepian and Ann Seidler is a great example
- ✓ Songs, Finger Plays, Math, Science, Blocks, Dramatic Play
 1. Scat the Cat
 2. Little Red Bird
 3. Going on a Picnic
 4. Flannel Glove
 - Have a back-up plan and be willing to switch to it if your original Circle Time activity just is not working
 - Use a Circle Time to close your day
 - ✓ Say a prayer
 - ✓ *We Had a Good Day* (Dr. Jean – “Kiss Your Brain”, www.drjean.org)
 - Do not force toddlers to come to Circle Time – be flexible as they join and leave your group

Some Myths about Circle Time

- *It's easy.* **Truth:** Circle Time is hard and takes a lot of practice, thought, and planning to be successful. You will get better with practice.
- *Anyone can do Circle Time.* **Truth:** You need to be knowledgeable of typical and atypical development, developmental variations, and children's different styles of learning.
- *Lesson plans and themes should drive Circle Time.* **Truth:** An excellent teacher capitalizes on children's needs and interests by observing them during free play. Where are they developmentally? What are they interested in?
- *Circle Time must be a serious time of learning.* **Truth:** Learning can and will occur as teachers have fun, act silly, are animated, and step out of the box. Remove fear of failure and just try.
- *Circle Time must occur at the beginning of the day.* **Truth:** Actually, children will be able to sit and stay engaged in the Circle Time activities much better after some very active play.
- *Circle Time must cover the calendar and days of the week.* **Truth:** There is little evidence that children under the age of 6 years find calendar activities marking extended periods of time meaningful. Instead, young children understand the concepts of later, before, and after. Young children can talk about things that have happened or will happen but they do not understand these things in terms of units of time (days, weeks, etc) or sequence.

References

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EXTRA'S:

Coming to Circle Time:

Hello Song by Kathie Hill & Darlene Abbott (“Songs & Chants for Antsy Pants” CD)

www.kathiehillmusic.com

Hello, hello this is how we sing hello.
Hello, hello, sing hello.

Hello, hello this is how we clap hello.
Hello, hello, clap hello.

Hello, hello this is how we jump hello.
Hello, hello, jump hello.

Hello, hello this is how we wave hello.
Hello, hello, wave hello.

TRY THIS: Once the children get familiar with this song start changing your “hello’s”. You might incorporate some hello’s that go with your current theme or season (i.e. animal hello’s, bug hello’s, snowman hello’s, etc.). You might want to work on some specific fine or gross motor movements (snap hello’s, wiggle 1 finger hello’s, finger to finger hello’s, move arms up & down hello’s, jumping jack hello’s, tip-toe hello’s, etc.). Include the children in the process by letting them pick some hello’s they’d like to try. This is a wonderful way to give kids ownership and encourage participation. It also lets them get creative & imaginative and work on some problem-solving. For instance, if a child wants to do a “dolphin hello” ask him/her what that would look like and have him/her figure it out.

Modify the words to incorporate ways to move to Circle Time:

Let’s hop, let’s hop, let’s hope to our Circle Time.
Let’s hop to our Circle Time.

Let’s jump, let’s jump, let’s jump to our Circle Time.
Let’s jump to our Circle Time..

Let’s tip-toe, let’s tip-toe, let’s tip-toe to our Circle Time.
Let’s tip-toe to our Circle Time.

Jump Up and Sit Down by Kathie Hill & Darlene Abbott (“Songs & Chants for Antsy Pants” CD)

www.kathiehillmusic.com

Put your hands up
Put your hands down
Stomp your feet and turn around
Put your hands up
Put your hands down
Jump up once and then sit down

Jump Up and Sit Down

Modified by Melissa McKenzie (there are lots of options for customizing this song to suit your needs)

Put your hands up
Put your hands down
Touch your nose and turn around
Put your hands up
Put your hands down
Flap your arms and then sit down
(now add in any other movements to work on a specific skill or by letting the kids help choose)

Hello How Are You

By Dr. Jean (“Sings Silly Songs” CD, www.drjean.org)

Hello how are you? (*children repeat*)
Hello how are you?
How are you this morning?

I am fine and I hope you are too (*children repeat*)
I am fine and I hope you are too.
I hope you are too this morning.

Turn to your neighbor and shake their hand (*children repeat & shake hands*)
Turn to your neighbor and shake their hand (*shake hands*)
Shake their hand this morning. (*shake hands*)

Hello How Are You

Modified by Melissa McKenzie

(there are lots of options for customizing this song to suit your needs)

Hello how are you? (*children repeat*)
Hello how are you?
How are you this morning?

I am wiggly and how about you? (*wiggle; children repeat*)

I am wiggly and how about you? (*wiggle*)

I am wiggly this morning. (*wiggle*)

(*other options: "I am happy" (big smiles); "I am stretchy" (big stretches); "I am sitting" (sit down); "I am bouncy" (bounce/hop around)*)

Turn to your neighbor and give a high-five. (*give high-fives, children repeat*)

Turn to your neighbor and give a high-five (*give high fives*)

Give a high-five this morning. (*give high fives*)

(*other options: "...and give a hug" (give hugs); "...and pinky hug" (give pinky hugs);*

"...and give a wink (give winks/blinks); "... and give a point" (give a "cool" point))

I'm Looking Through the Window

By Dr. Jean, modified by Melissa McKenzie (to the tune, "In and out the window")

(*Have an empty wooden picture frame that is decorated. Look through the frame as you sing the song, or use a large magnifying glass and look through it as you sing the song.*)

I'm looking through the window

I'm looking through the window

I'm looking through the window

And I see my friend " _____ "

(*Make a circle "frame" by decorating a foam wreath with duct tape. This will help reinforce the shape.*)

I'm looking through a circle

I'm looking through a circle

I'm looking through a circle

And I see my friend " _____ "

(*Try making a square and a triangle and modify the song to look through each of those shapes.*)

You can also sing this song to help find things in the room or down the hallway as you walk or outside as you play:

I'm looking through the circle

I'm looking through the circle

I'm looking through the circle

And I see something blue.

Other songs:

- Songs and Chants for Antsy Pants CD from www.kathiehillmusic.com
 - Circle Up
 - Come and Sing
 - To Table Time

- On The Floor
- Come Back
- “Surprise Sack” from Dr. Jean, “All Day Long” CD, www.drjean.org

Finger Plays:

Ten Little Friends by Dr. Jean (www.drjean.org)

(hold up your fingers & count your friends)

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 - Ten Little Friends *(wiggle each finger as you count it)*

Now hide them behind your back)

Ten little friends came out to play *(slowly bring your wiggling fingers from behind your back)*

On a bright and sunny day *(spread your fingers out and move hands slowly back and forth)*

They had a little talk *(face hands together and let fingers wiggle and "talk" to each other)*

Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk.

And they took a little walk *(face hands out & take turns moving them forward to "walk")*

Walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, stop!

Till they saw a great, big hill *(lean your head & hands back and look up at the top of the hill)*

They climbed to the top *(take turns climbing hands to the top)*

Climb, climb, climb, climb, climb

And stood very still *(hold hand up straight, spread fingers out and don't move)*

Until they tumbled down *(roll your hands down)*

And fell to the ground, BOOM! *(drop hands to the ground)*

"We're tired" they said *(bring hands up from the ground looking droopy & tired)*

So they went home and went to bed *(count your fingers, tucking each one in as you count)*

1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Shhhhh, they're sleeping, we'd better whisper *(now finish counting/tucking the other 5 fingers)*

6, 7, 8, 9, 10 *(hold closed fists together facing each other)*

Shhhhh *(still whispering and lay your sleeping fingers down to rest)*

Ten Fingers, Original Author Unknown

I have ten fingers *(hold up both hands, fingers spread)*

They all belong to me, *(point to self)*

I can make them do things-

Would you like to see?

I can shut them up tight *(make fists)*

I can open them wide *(open hands)*

I can put them together *(place palms together)*

I can make them all hide *(put hands behind back)*

I can make them jump high (*hands over head, use a high voice*)

I can make them jump low (*touch floor, use a low voice*)

I can fold them up quietly (*fold hands in lap, use a whisper*)

And hold them just so.

Easy Songs to sing in Circle Time:

These Are My Glasses by Laurie Berkner Band (“Whaddaya Think of That?” CD, available on iTunes)

These are my glasses, (*make eyeglasses with your fingers in front of you*)

This is my book. (*close hands in front of you like a closed book*)

I put on my glasses (*make eyeglasses with your fingers around your eyes*)

And open up the book. (*open hands, palms up in front of you*)

Now I read, read, read. (*hold “open book” and bounce book 3 times*)

And I look, look, look. (*finger eyeglasses and look 3 times*)

I put down my glasses (*carefully remove eyeglasses and put gently on floor*)

And Whoop! close up the book. (*close hands with a clap*)

Sticky Bubble Gum By Hugh Hanley (“Circle of Song” CD, www.hughhanley.com)

Sticky, sticky, sticky, sticky bubblegum. (*open hands wave back and forth*)

Bubblegum, bubblegum, bubblegum. (*open hands wave back and forth*)

Sticky, sticky, sticky, sticky bubblegum. (*open hands wave back and forth*)

Makes my hands stick to my knees. (*put your hands on your knees*)

So I pull ‘em, and I pull ‘em and I pull ‘em! (*pretend to pull really hard trying to get your hands off of your knees*)

(*Keep singing but let children choose where their hands will stick*)

Bubble Gum By Mary Jo Huff (“Gettin’ Loose with Mother Goose CD available on iTunes)

I love it, love it, love it

I love my bubblegum.

I love it, love it, love it

I love my bubblegum.

I put it in my mouth.

Sugar free of course.

Chew it up, chomp, chomp, chomp

Blow a great big bubble. (*pretend to blow and then clap for the pop*)

Icky, sticky, icky, sticky bubblegum (*wave open hands back and forth*)

Bubblegum, bubblegum (*wave open hands back and forth*)
Icky, sticky, icky, sticky bubblegum (*wave open hands back and forth*)
Bubblegum, bubblegum (*wave open hands back and forth*)
Makes my hands stick to my... (*stick your hands to whatever body part you choose*)
And you pull it, and you pull it, and you pull it! (*pretend to pull hands off*)

Songs to end your day in Circle Time:

We Had a Good Day by Dr. Jean (“Kiss Your Brain” CD)

www.drjean.org

We had a good day. (*one “thumbs up”*)
We had a great day. (*two “thumbs up”*)
So pat yourself on the back. (*pat your back*)
We had a good day. (*one “thumbs up”*)
We had a great day. (*two “thumbs up”*)
So pat yourself on the back. (*pat your back*)

We thought a lot today. (*tap your head*)
We learned in many ways. (*open hands wide in front of you*)
So kiss your brain. (*kiss your fingers then “tap” the kiss onto your head*)
We thought a lot today. (*tap your head*)
We learned in many ways. (*open hands wide in front of you*)
So kiss your brain. (*kiss your fingers then “tap” the kiss onto your head*)

It's time to say so long and end with a song. (*point to your wrist like there's a watch*)
So wave good-bye to your friends. (*wave*)
It's time to say so long and end with a song. (*point to your wrist like there's a watch*)
So wave good-bye to your friends. (*wave*)

Name songs for Circle Time:



Who's That Underneath that Hat, Author unknown
(to the tune of “Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes”)

(Use a big hat to place on each child's head as you sing. For older children, they may let you cover their whole head with the hat and then the other children in the class have to use their deductive reasoning and compare/contrast to figure out which friend is under the crazy hat.)

Who's that underneath that hat, that hat?
Who's that underneath that hat, that hat?
I see _____ underneath that hat.
_____ 's underneath that hat, that crazy hat!
(repeat for each one of your children)

Flippity, Dippity, Fluttery Flea by Kathie Hill & Darlene Abbott ("Songs & Chants for Antsy Pants" CD)

www.kathiehillmusic.com

(Speak into a microphone as you go to each child and say this little rhyme. When it's the child's turn to answer, point the microphone to the child.)

Flippity, dippity, fluttery flea
Won't you say your name for me?
"Melissa", "Hi Melissa"

Keep repeating for each child.

I Wish I Had a Little Red Box By Dr. Jean ("All Day Long" CD)

www.drjean.org

I wish had a little red box to put my mommy in *(make a box with hands)*
I'd take her out *(open hands and take something out of one hand)*
And go kiss, kiss, kiss *(blow kisses & make kiss noises)*
And put her back again *(put something back into hand & make a box again)*

I wish had a little red box to put my daddy in *(make a box with hands)*
I'd take him out *(open hands and take something out of one hand)*
And go "mmmm, mmmm, hug" *(give yourself a hug)*
And put him back again *(put something back into hand & make a box again)*

I wish had a little red box to put my good friend in *(make a box with hands)*
I'd take them out *(open hands and take something out of one hand)*
And go "how do you do?" *(wave to friends)*
And put them back again *(put something back into hand & make a box again)*

I Wish I Had a Little _____ Box Modified by Melissa McKenzie
(there are lots of options for customizing this song to suit your needs)

(Start by asking 1 child what his/her favorite color is and put that in the box. Let's assume that Emma chose pink.)

I wish I had a little pink box to put my Emma in *(make a box with hands)*
I'd take her out *(open hands and take something out of one hand)*
And hug, hug, hug *(hug yourself)*
And put her back again. *(put something back into hand & make a box again)*

(Start by asking 1 child what his/her favorite color is and what he/she would like to put in the box. Let's assume the answers were: blue & dog.)

I wish I had a little blue box to put my doggie in *(make a box with hands)*
I'd take him out *(open hands and take something out of one hand)*
And go "ruff, ruff, ruff"
And put him back again. *(put something back into hand & make a box again)*

Willoughby Wallaby Woo By Raffi ("Singable Songs for the Very Young" CD, available on iTunes)

Willoughby wallaby wee
An elephant sat on me.
Willoughby wallaby woo.
An elephant sat on you.

Willoughby wallaby walissa
An elephant sat on Melissa.
Willoughby wallaby wusan.
An elephant sat on Susan.

Tick-a-Tack-a, Original author unknown

(Use a phonics phone made out of a small piece of 3/4" PVC pipe and two 3/4" PVC elbows. Give the phone to the first child, then as you sing, the child says, "I'm home" into the phone and passes the phone to the friend you name.)



(Tap and clap to the rhythm as you sing)
Hey there Emma someone's on the phone, *(Emma is holding the phone)*
If it's your friend Caleb tell him you're at home. *(Emma says, "I'm home" into the phone and passes the phone to Caleb)*

Singing tick-a, tack-a, tick-a, tack-a – wally-woo-woo.

Singing tick-a, tack-a, tick-a, tack-a – wally-woo-woo.

Hey there Caleb someone's on the phone, *(Caleb is holding the phone)*

If it's your friend Mark tell him you're at home. *(Caleb says, "I'm home" into the phone and passes the phone to Mark)*

Singing tick-a, tack-a, tick-a, tack-a – wally-woo-woo.

Singing tick-a, tack-a, tick-a, tack-a – wally-woo-woo.

(Continue singing until each child has had a turn with the phone, end with yourself)

Try this: Want to add in some advanced early literacy skills for the older children if they're developmentally ready? Trying replacing the starting sounds for the "tic-a-tac-a" and the "wally-woo-woo" with another sound. For example, let's replace those sounds with the sound for "B":

Singing bick-a, back-a, bick-a, back-a

Bally-boo-boo.

Singing bick-a, back-a, bick-a, back-a

Bally-boo-boo.

Activities for Circle Time:

Monster Box, original author unknown

(Make a "monster" out of a sock, use an empty Pringles can, use an empty tissue box, or an empty margarine or cookie dough container. As long as it looks like a funny "monster", it works.)



Shape monster, shape monster

Munch, munch, munch.

How 'bout a triangle for your lunch?

The Monster Box can be used for many concepts/skills that you would like to reinforce with play: shapes, colors, numbers, letters, etc. Consider giving your Monster Box a name. For example:

Herbie, Herbie
Munch, munch, munch.
How 'bout the color red for your lunch?

Herbie, Herbie
Munch, munch, munch.
How 'bout the letter "A" for your lunch?

You could also put a variety items/manipulatives out on the table. Then say the little rhyme and let a child select anything from what is out on the table and tell you what he has selected before feeding it to the monster.

Hungry monster, hungry monster.
Munch, munch, munch.
What do you want for your lunch, lunch, lunch?

Consider using small poms-poms of varying colors/sizes and a variety of grabbers (plastic tweezers, strawberry hullers, chopsticks with helpers attached, etc) for the children to use. Then when the children feed the monster they are building the fine motor skills as well as math logic.

Shared Reading: "The Hungry Thing" by Jan Slepian and Ann Seidler



Little Red Bird in the Tree Flannel Activity



