Social Studies Background

A sharing circle is a sacred tradition in many Indigenous communities. It is a respectful approach to talking with others. The goal of the sharing circle is to foster interconnectedness and dialogue, and to promote safety and equality within the community. The circle has no beginning or end and no marked place for a leader or followers. Each member of the circle belongs and is equal. Those sitting within the sharing circle are guaranteed to be heard, without interruption, by holding an object, such as a talking stick, feather, peace pipe, or other artifact of significance. This is known as the talking piece and often reflects connection to the land.
Talking circles have come from the sacred tradition of sharing circles in many Indigenous communities. Educators are increasingly incorporating the talking circle within their practices to promote a sense of belonging and trust among their students, as shown in the image above. Students are encouraged to share ideas and listen attentively to others without interrupting. All students have the right to pass if that sense of trust is still developing. This inclusive practice allows all members of the circle to not only be heard but also to be seen and respected. It is common practice that all information shared within the circle remains confidential.

The talking circle can also be used by members of a family to discuss issues and concerns safely and calmly and to help resolve conflicts or misunderstandings.

**Purpose**

In this activity, children will explore the social studies concept of making ethical judgments that reflect fairness, equity, and inclusivity. They will learn about talking circles, which have come from the sacred tradition of sharing circles in the Indigenous communities. The talking circle is a seating arrangement that permits individual participants in a group discussion to have an equal voice in making decisions that are fair. The talking circle also enables participants to feel heard by others in the circle. This practice fosters open dialogue and helps build trust among students and teachers in classrooms, as well as among members of a family or community. Children will engage in a role-play featuring a talking circle. They will also create a slogan to promote the practice of talking circles as a means to help resolve disputes and misunderstandings through fair decision making.

**Materials**

- An object (e.g., a stick) that can serve as a talking piece
- Art materials to create a sign displaying a slogan (optional)

**Develop an Understanding of Fair Decision Making**

1. Display the image above of the people seated in a circle around a buffalo robe. Direct children's attention to the details in the image that give them information about what is happening in the image. Ask children:
   - **What do you see in this image?** (People sitting in a circle; one person is talking and the other people are listening to her.)
   - **Who do you think the people in this image are?** (a teacher and her class and some other grownups—the other grownups might be moms; a group of people at a school)
   - **What do you think is happening in this image? What clues support your thinking?** (The teacher is talking. It must be about something important because everybody but one person seems to be paying attention to her.)
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- **What do you notice about the person who is talking?** (She is holding something. I am not sure what it is. It looks like some kind of stick.)
- **Why do you think the people in the image are sitting this way?** (So everybody can see the person who is talking. So nobody is blocking anyone. So everybody can see everyone else. So everybody feels like they belong.)
- **What do you see in the centre of the circle?** (Some kind of big rug. It looks like it might be made from an animal.) Explain to children that the people are seated around a buffalo robe and that buffalos were important to the Indigenous Peoples of North America who lived on the grasslands of the interior Plains. Buffalos provided food and their hides were used as blankets, saddles, or trade items.

2. Introduce the idea of a talking circle. Ask children, **Do you know what a “talking circle” means?** If children need prompting, say, **A talking circle is when a group of people sit down to talk to one another in a circle about something important.** Ask children, **Are there times when you sit in a circle like this?** (Yes, we have circle time at school in the morning. We sometimes sit in a circle to listen to stories and to talk about them.)

3. Ask children, **Think about circle time at school. Does everybody always listen well when the teacher or a classmate is talking?** (Yes, most of the time. No, sometimes someone interrupts without putting their hand up first.)

4. Tell children, **In a talking circle, the person who is talking gets to hold an object known as a talking piece.** Sometimes the talking piece is a stick. When someone holds the talking piece, it means it’s that person’s turn to talk and no one should interrupt them. **What do you think of this practice?** (It’s a good idea because it’s annoying when someone interrupts you. It’s a good idea because everybody gets a turn to talk.)

5. Tell children, **A talking circle is a sacred tradition among many Indigenous Peoples, those who first lived on the land that today is known as Canada.** The talking circle is a way to make sure that the decisions made by a group of people are fair. **Ask, What does the word “fair” mean to you?** (It means everybody gets treated the same way. It means that we share things. It means that everybody gets a turn.)

6. Direct children’s attention back to the people gathered in a circle in the image. Tell them, **The talking stick will be passed from one person to the next and the person who holds the stick gets to say something.** Suppose the people in the circle need to decide about something important, such as what to do if some children at school are not letting other children play games with them. **Do you think a talking circle might help the people in the group to make a fair decision?** (Yes, because everybody will have a chance to say something if they want to. No one will be left out. Nobody will shout over the other people to say what they want. People will get to share their ideas about how to solve the problem.)
Role-Play Fair Decision Making
1. Suggest a scenario for children, for example: *Suppose someone has taken all the red crayons and there are none left for other children to draw with. Everybody thinks this is not fair. How can we decide what to do about this in a way that is fair to everyone?* (We can talk to one another and share ideas about what to do. We can tell the person who took all the red crayons that it's not fair to everybody else to do that.)

2. Ask children, *Do you think a talking circle might help us make a fair decision?* (Yes, because everybody listens to everyone else in a talking circle, so no one will be ignored. Yes, because the person taking all the red crayons will have to listen to other people. That person might not realize that taking all the red crayons is not fair. But a talking circle can remind them.)

3. Suggest that children form a talking circle and role-play the problem of someone taking all the red crayons. Together with the children, decide on an object to be used as a talking piece. Then have children role-play the participants in the talking circle, each child taking turns speaking while holding the talking piece.

4. Ask children to share their ideas about how to decide on a solution to the problem that is fair. Make a list of their suggestions and display it.

5. Children's family members might also try out the practice of using a talking circle to make a fair decision about solving a problem or a conflict, such as people not sharing something, not taking turns, or not helping out with chores around the home. The family can sit in a circle to discuss how to make fair decisions about sharing time on the computer, keeping the home tidy, making sure everybody gets their fair share of treats, and so on.

Create a Slogan About Fair Decision Making
1. Ask children if they know what the word “slogan” means. If they need prompting, tell them that a slogan is a short phrase that is easy to remember and that slogans are often used in advertising and politics. The goal of a slogan is to persuade members of the public or a specific group to do something or to buy something. Give students examples of some catchy slogans, such as “It tastes awful and it works” (to persuade people to use a cough medicine), “Come to sea for yourself” (to persuade people to visit Nova Scotia), and “Get cracking” (to persuade people to eat eggs).

2. Encourage children to reflect on what they have learned about talking circles as a way to help people make fair decisions together. Then have them involve family members in creating a slogan that a school or community might use to promote the practice of talking circles (such as “Let's Talk in Circles,” “Circles Work Best,” or “Come Join the Circle”) or fair decision making (such as “Being Fair is the Way to Go” or “Fairness Works for Everyone”). Each member of the family can contribute an idea.

3. Children and members of their families can write their slogans as signs to display in their homes or as hashtags or mottos on social media.