

## **The “Magic Circle”**

### A Daily Therapeutic Group

#### **Background:** A glimpse at the possibilities

This interpretation of the “Magic Circle” was developed in 1982 when Hollis Dannaham was a paraprofessional in New York City’s District 75 (the Special Education District for the most severe students). She worked in a “Teacher-Mom” program for severely emotionally disturbed 4<sup>th</sup> graders. The head teacher was completely burnt out and left the running of the class of twelve students to her two paraprofessionals. One particular student’s behavior was out of control, throwing chairs, threatening the students and teachers with a yard stick, etc. A psychologist friend mentioned a therapeutic technique called the “Magic Circle” and Hollis started implementing her interpretation of the technique in the class daily. The results were phenomenal! One particular incidence stands out. The student mentioned earlier, began taunting and picking a fight with another student. The rest of the students circled around the potential victim, protecting him and began talking down the attacking student. He eventually calmed down and they all went on with their day. Later, in 1995 Hollis worked in a day treatment program in a class with nine severely emotionally disturbed adolescents and three assistants. This was a private school where public schools sent their most troubled students. It was the step before residential treatment or jail. She once again implemented the “Magic Circle” in this venue and the results were just as impressive. One third of the students returned to their regular high schools for their senior year. Many of these students continue to correspond with Hollis as they successfully move through their adult lives.

#### **Rationale:**

Some students are unavailable for the learning process due to their emotional issues. Therefore if you want them to succeed academically, their emotional needs must be taken care of and worked through before you can expect them to be open to learning. The idea behind the “Magic Circle” is to create a consistent, safe space for students to share their feelings, work through issues, discover alternative methods of dealing with anger, learn how to communicate and gain a sense of being part of a caring group. The adult in the group acts as a facilitator rather than a leader. Ideally the group would meet daily (three times a week minimum) in a group of nine and no larger than twelve.

#### **Role of the facilitator:**

The facilitator is a key factor to the success of the “Magic Circle.” Although still an authority, enforcing the rules, managing the group, etc., it is vital that the facilitator is also a participant. He/she needs to participate in the activities to help the students get to know him/her on a different level than they would as the “teacher.” If a student breaks the rules in the “circle” it is important to give the pre-determined consequence and be non judgmental. No lectures! If a student has an outburst in the group while they are

working through an issue, there are no consequences for this. If they need to curse or scream to work through it, then that is what happens in the

“circle” and when circle is over they move on with their day. If they were to do this outside of the circle then whatever the class rules are regarding cursing etc. would be addressed. The facilitator is responsible for creating a safe, non judgmental space for which the students can grow. Classroom behavior often improves because of the trust and bond built during the “Magic Circle.” All adults who work in the room with the students need to be participants in the “Magic Circle.”

### **Dos and Don'ts**

DO	DON'T
participate in the activities as the facilitator	lecture students on their behavior
share your feelings during the process	yell or reprimand during “Magic Circle” time
use “I” statements “I feel frustrated when you talk over me.”	blame
make “Magic Circle” time a priority – if it is on the schedule for the day then make it happen	be afraid of emotional outbursts – it is part of the process
be genuine	fake it (students can feel a lack of authenticity and the group will backfire on you)
be prepared – always have extra ideas and activities just in case (see resource section)	end early because there is nothing to do – there is always something to do
bring situations from the classroom to the “circle” to work through	just used scripted ideas from books
call an emergency “Magic Circle” during a situation that arises during the day if you think it will benefit the situation	allow students to manipulate the “circle” ie. try to get a “circle” going during academic time or try to extend the length of the “circle”
create an actual circle for the students to sit in, make it different than the usual classroom set-up	keep the students at desks

The natural development of the “Magic Circle” occurs in three phases. There is no set time frame for each phase. The facilitator will know when the group is ready to shift into

the next phase by the group's level of cohesion, their level of communication and student behavior.

### **Phase 1: Building safety, trust and finding similarities**

Explain to the students what this "Magic Circle" is (you can rename it whatever you want depending on your population). It is a time to come together in a safe space as equals to work through issues that come up in their life or day at school, to communicate honestly with one another and to have fun getting to know each other. Start with what is not negotiable.

- confidentiality, what is discussed in the group, stays in the group
- one person speaks at a time (you can use a talking stick for certain populations)
- challenges yes, put downs no (it is fine to challenge someone for their own growth but not okay to put anyone down or tease for any reason.
- get the students to come up with any other guideline that they feel will provide them with a safe space
- co-create consequences with the students if these rules are broken

Have the students come up with some sort of ritual for the beginning of group to separate it from the regular school day.

It is good to begin with some team building activities that help the students get to know each other and their similarities. (See Resource Section) The first few meetings may only be these fun activities and then going forward they begin to taper off as other types of activities take their place.

### **Phase 2: Group dynamics and communication building**

After students are comfortable with each other and the facilitator, it is time to move to more pointed activities. Examples are; role plays, pointed questions or sentence starters for each person in the circle to respond, work through an issue that has occurred in the class (See Resource Section).

### **Phase 3: A life of its own and celebrating differences**

Once the students feel safe, feel connected as a group, trust the facilitator and have learned some basic communication skills, the group begins to run itself. Students look forward to "circle" time to be able to bring up what is bothering them or to share something. It is important to always have an activity in your back pocket just in case no one has anything to bring into the "circle" that day. By this time students have discovered what makes each participant unique. Instead of teasing or ridiculing others for these differences they can be celebrated with the idea that each of these unique

qualities together as a group is more powerful than any of the individuals in the group alone.

### **Behavior Management:**

For most students the fun activities and “sacred space” that is created during the “Magic Circle” is enough to make behavioral issues obsolete. However, it takes time to get there and sometimes there is a particular student who is resistant to the process. On the first day you have discussed and co-created with the students the non-negotiables and consequences that should occur if those non-negotiables are not met. Usually time-out is the best method to manage behavior because the “circle” is so compelling. It can be very effective to have the time-out space be in the same room, so the student sees what fun and interaction the group is having without them. Sometimes, however, the student sits out of the group but cannot keep quiet, or is out of control. If you have two teachers in your classrooms, it would be a good idea to have one teacher as the facilitator of the group and the other teacher as the behavior manager. If you are the only teacher in the room, work out the time of your circle with the guidance counselor or dean to take on the manager role. If the student can’t stay in the room without being disruptive then the teacher/manager can take them for a walk, find another room to sit in, bring a chair out in the hallway and stay with the student. After a set period of time of no talking, the teacher/manager can talk with the student and try to uncover why the student acted the way they did (once again without judgment or lecture). If the teacher/manager can uncover the feelings behind the behavior then they can discuss other ways of dealing with those feelings in order to be able to behave in a way that would allow him/her to stay in the “circle.” Once this is worked out, the student can return to the “circle” that day. If the student is unwilling to open up during the full time of the “circle” that day, then the facilitator could try talking with him/her at a later time in the day. If you don’t get to the underlining feelings/issues then the behavior is likely to continue. No matter what, the student is allowed to participate with a fresh start in the next “Magic Circle.”

**Resources** – There are large amounts of resources for this type of work. Here is a sampling of ideas plus internet and print resources.

#### For Phase 1

“I like my neighbor who ...” – place enough six inch long masking tape pieces on the floor in a circle so all participants have a spot except for one person. That one person stands in the center of the circle and says, for example, “I like my neighbor who has a cat.” Then all the people on the tape who have cats have to move from their tape spot to another tape spot. The last person standing with no tape spot is in the middle and starts again with a new “I like my neighbor who ...”

Knots – stand in a circle, each person needs to grab hold of two different people’s hands and it can’t be the person next to you. Now try to untangle the knot without

letting go of the hands you are holding to get back into a circle. Afterwards process the kind of communication that occurred to resolve the problem.

Getting to know you BINGO – create a BINGO board with facts about each person in the room on them. The group goes around and has to get the person that the fact is about to initial their box. The first person to have initials on all of their boxes yells, “BINGO!” Discuss what surprised them about people that they did not know before.

Two truths and a lie – have each person write down two truths and a lie about themselves. When it is their turn they read their three items and the group needs to guess which one is the lie.

Trust walk – break into pairs, have one person blind folded and the other person leads them around. Then switch partners.

The chain gang – Have strips of different colored paper ready. Have students pick three pieces of cut paper. On one write, their favorite sport, the next, their favorite food, finally, something they love to do (or any other topics you feel are appropriate for your students). Once they have completed their strips, share with each other and then put together a chain to hang in the room. Talk about how a chain is strong because the pieces are linked together and that our class is stronger because of each of us who are part of it.

### **Internet Resources**

<http://wilderdom.com/games/InitiativeGames.html>

<http://4h.uwex.edu/clubs/documents/teambuilding0231.pdf>

<http://www.ultimatecampresource.com/site/camp-activities/trust-activities.page-1.html>

<http://www.deca.org/docs/chapter-resources/DECA-teambuildinggames.pdf>

### **Books**

*Team Building Activities for Every Group* by Alanna Jones

*Adventures in Team Building Grades 1 and 2* by Bonnie Krueger

*Adventures in Team Building Grades 3 and 4* by Heather Knowles

*The big book of team building* by John W. Newstrom

*80 Morning Meeting Ideas for Grades K-2* by Susan Lattanzi Rosner

## For Phase 2 and Phase 3

Have students complete a sentence, I feel happy when... I get really mad when ... My favorite thing to do when I am not in school is... etc. Let each student have a turn answering the question.

Give a situation and have each student respond to how they would handle it. For example, "You see your friend take an ipod from a classmate's bag, what do you do?"

Role plays – give the students a situation and have two or more students act it out. You can put each character on a slip of paper and have the students blindly pick who they will play. Then discuss what happened, how it could have been handled differently etc. For example, one classmate just took another's dessert at lunch. Or you can use scripted role plays to help students learn appropriate communication skills.

## **Internet Resources**

<http://www.kidsinco.com/role-plays/>

[http://www.eycb.coe.int/composito/chapter\\_4/pdf/4\\_8.pdf](http://www.eycb.coe.int/composito/chapter_4/pdf/4_8.pdf)

[http://www.internet4classrooms.com/character\\_ed.htm](http://www.internet4classrooms.com/character_ed.htm)

<http://www.classroomsthatwork.com/pdf/Roll%20Playing.pdf>

<http://voices.yahoo.com/anger-management-role-play-matt-falsely-accuses-jonathan-5977424.html>

## **Books**

*Conflict Resolution Activities That Work!* by Kathleen M. Hollenbeck

*Ready-to-Use Conflict-Resolution Activities for Elementary Students* by Beth Teolis

*Conflict Resolution For Kids: A Group Facilitator's Guide* by Pamela S. Lane

*The Big Book of Conflict Resolution Games: Quick, Effective Activities to Improve Communication, Trust and Collaboration (Big Book Series)* by Mary Scannell

*104 Activities That Build: Self-Esteem, Teamwork, Communication, Anger Management, Self-Discovery, Coping Skills* by Alanna Jones

*Anger Management Games For Children* by Deborah Plummer