

## From Good to Great: Creative and Interactive Circle Time Routines for Young Audiences Circle Time Strategies

### Reading Books

Reading books aloud with young children is one of the most important things you can do to support their language development. According to experts, reading to children of all ages, from newborns to adolescents, is beneficial in helping them have enthusiasm for reading, and a joyful and successful literary experience. By reading to the children in your class, you are helping prepare them for success in their future careers. Reading provides an enjoyable experience and motivates children to want to learn to read on their own. It helps develop comprehension skills as children follow the story line, listen for predictable phrases, guess what might come next, and think about what the characters in the story may be thinking or feeling.

### Helping Children Understand the Story

First, show the children the cover of the book, read the title and ask, “What do you think this book is about?” Say, “Those are good guesses. Let’s read the book and see.” Another strategy to help increase children’s understanding of the book is to give them a question to think about as you read. For example, “The cover of the book has a picture of a large fish with a big frown. As I read the story, think about this question: why is the fish sad?” When you are finished reading the book, you can revisit the question and ask the children to tell you why the fish in the story was sad. As they answer the question, you can summarize the main points of the story, which will increase their comprehension skills.

### Learning New Words

Children learn language best when they have the opportunity to experience and/or act out new words. Simply labeling an object or picture is ineffective in teaching children a new word. Rather, have them act out the word. For example, pretend to be asleep and then wake up to demonstrate “awaken.” Then ask, “How do you awaken in the mornings? Does your mom or dad wake you up? Do you wake up by yourself? Does the sun in your window wake you up?” Acting out the word and linking it to their own life experiences will help the children remember

the new word and enable them to eventually use the word in their conversations with others. A rich vocabulary is an indicator of success in kindergarten and elementary school. As teachers of young children, we need to introduce uncommon words to children frequently to build their vocabulary. The difference between a common and uncommon word is how often a child hears it in the course of normal, everyday conversation. For example, the words “brother” and “sister” are common words and “sibling” is an uncommon word.

### Storytelling

Research tells us that storytelling is “perhaps the most powerful way that human beings organize experience,” and there is a sequential way in which children develop into storytellers. By age three, a child is able to construct and tell a story without the help of an adult. (Genishi and Honig, 2009). In circle time we can tell stories in several different ways. Teachers can tell familiar stories, such as fairy tales, using puppets, flannel boards or other objects. While the children listen to the story, the props help them follow the story line.

Teachers can make up stories, using familiar topics, characters, and even names of children in the class. This would be a great way to address problems you might be having. For example, you could make up a short story using puppets who both want to play with the same toy. The puppet characters could resolve their problem by working out a way to share the toy by taking turns or playing with it together. You have just modeled to your children how to solve their own conflicts.

### Flannel Boards

Are you familiar with flannel boards? It is a board — about the size of poster board and covered with flannel fabric — on which you can place felt pieces that illustrate a story as you tell it. The pieces can be homemade or purchased commercially. Children can use the flannel board to retell the story, playing alone or with each other, during free play.

### Reenacting the story

A fun thing to do in circle is to have the children act out a story they have just heard. You can do this by providing simple props, such as a hat, scarf, basket, or any other object, that will help them pretend. As children remember the characters and what happened in the story, their comprehension of it is increased. As they reenact a story, you or another child can be the

narrator, describing what the actors are doing and giving hints when they need a little help. You can leave these props out when children go to centers so they can continue this important type of play throughout the day. You may want to put the props in your pretend play center.

### Sharing Time

An important function of circle time is giving the children a chance to speak while their friends listen. You can create a systematic way of giving each child his or her turn at “having the floor” during circle. One way to do this is “Daily News.” In Daily News, one child (we'll call him David) tells the group something that is of interest to him. This may be that he went to the donut store for breakfast, that he is wearing his favorite light-up shoes today, or that his toy broke last night. Whatever he says is okay. You will summarize what he has said to ensure that you have the details right, then ask the children, “What shall I write to describe David’s news?” They may say, “He had donuts for breakfast!” Then you can write in big print, “David had donuts for breakfast.” As you print, talk about the letters in the words and what they sound like. Ask the children to tell you what letter to use next. Say the letters as you write them, and as you complete a word, say aloud that you are going to skip a space to separate the words. At the end of the sentence, tell the children you are putting a period which means “stop here.” When you have written all of David’s news, read it aloud and ask David to write his name (or a letter of his name or a picture, depending on his ability) on the paper. Keep the Daily News in a place where children can go back and read it throughout the day.

This activity helps children begin to understand that print is meaningful in their daily lives and that it serves different functions. Spotlighting a child and letting him or her share personal news is a great way to build self-esteem and confidence. It also allows children the opportunity to give someone else a turn, an important task in early childhood. And of course, you are modeling writing and reading with Daily News, which is key in learning to read. This shared writing activity has many benefits. (National Research Council, 1999)

### Exploring New Materials

One way you can present a new idea or teaching topic in circle time is to bring in some items for the children to touch, handle, explore, and experience on their own. Perhaps you are going to be learning about the seasons. You could bring a box to circle, filled with silk flowers,

sunglasses, mittens, autumn leaves, packets of vegetable seeds, a sweater, a tank top and other items which are used in different seasons of the year. Let the children explore the items and talk about what they find. Give them the opportunity to draw their own conclusions about the items before proceeding to the next topic. Listen carefully and observe the children as they explore. This will tell you what they already know about seasons of the year, as well as what they still need to learn. This will help you plan learning activities that will meet the needs of your children.

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