# Forming Adolescent Circles

## What are Adolescent Circles?

In order to learn and engage actively (inside and beyond their activity spaces), adolescents participating in any programme need to feel safe, included and valued. . The time they spend together should give them a chance to connect with their peers, and practice communication, teamwork and other skills as they work, play and have fun together. To foster these positive relationships, facilitators should support the adolescents who participate in their programmes in coming together and forming ’Adolescent Circles’ (‘Circles’) – groups of 7-25 adolescents who regularly participate in activities to learn, have fun or take a break from stressful aspects of their lives, and to practice skills, express themselves, work together, and take action in their community.

Facilitators can use another name for ‘circle’ if they prefer. Other names include ‘team,’ ’group,’ and ‘club.’ Or, let adolescents create their own name for their circle.

### Why a ’Circle’?

Everyone fits in a Circle – no one is more or less important. Each member brings their ideas and skills to the Circle, and helps to strengthen it. By listening and supporting each other, members keep the Circle connected.

Circles work together to achieve group goals. This unites them. Ideally, members of a Circle develop a shared identity, even if their ethnic, religious, caste, or other identities differ. This shared identity needs to be fostered with care.

Circles are strong because they are flexible. If a new adolescent joins, the Circle can grow to include him or her as an equal member. If an adolescent needs to step out of the Circle—to help their family, work, or respond to other situations—the Circle shrinks but remains intact.

### Who should work together in a Circle?

**Size**

***Keep the Circle size small*.** Adolescent Circles can include between 7 – 25 adolescents. Circles of this size allow all participants to share their thoughts and opinions during sessions, and get to know each other. They also allow facilitators to get to know each participant, provide them with support, and recognize their strengths, interests and needs. If there are more than 25 in a Circle, participants may feel less sense of belonging, and facilitators may find it challenging to manage activities and keep participants engaged.

**Age**

***Group adolescents by similar age.*** Circles usually function best if they include participants who are around the same age, so that activities and approaches can be created to fit their abilities and interests. When adolescents are with peers close to their own age, they may feel more comfortable raising and discussing certain topics.

**Gender:**

Same-gender Circles often work best. Same-gender Circles provide adolescent girls and boys with a safe space to discuss and learn about topics that are important to them, including topics that may be sensitive or specific to their roles or other aspects of their development. Forming same-gender Circles can be essential to ensure access to and safety in programme activities in contexts in which it is not acceptable for adolescent boys and girls to interact.

**Diversity**

***Form diverse circles.*** Beyond gender and age, circles should be diverse and should give adolescents a chance to connect with peers with different abilities, backgrounds and experiences. Circles should be inclusive, and should never reinforce discriminatory norms or attitudes. ***[Insert icon for Include all adolescents]*** Facilitators (together with programme coordinators and others in the host community) should take care to ensure that the composition of Adolescent Circles does not prevent any adolescents from participating. However, when forming diverse Circles, they should also take care not to create conditions that adolescents are not prepared to handle safely. *For example:*

***Remove social barriers to adolescents’ participation– including those that are invisible.*** In some contexts, adolescents may not be comfortable, or may not be supported or permitted by their families or communities, to participate in activities with adolescents of different ages, genders, roles or from other groups. For example, older adolescents may be embarrassed or uncomfortable joining Circles that appear to be for younger children. Adolescents who are married or are parents, and are seen as adults in their communities, may not be interested or permitted by their spouses to play with those who are unmarried and still ’children.’ In these cases, forming separate Adolescent Circles for certain groups of adolescents may be a strategy to reduce or remove these barriers to their participation.

***Build peace, and be sensitive to conflict.*** Learning with and from adolescents from different ethnicities, religions, or other backgrounds can create valuable opportunities for adolescents to develop empathy and respect, among other competencies. Forging positive relationships across these differences can also contribute to long-term possibilities for social cohesion and peace. However, in some conflict affected contexts, it may be challenging for adolescents from different backgrounds or experiences to come together. Work with the community to try to use Adolescent Circles as an opportunity for adolescents to get to know each other and enjoy the bonds that can grow from playing, learning and working together. Do not force adolescents from different groups together if this might exacerbate tensions or undermine the community’s trust in your programme.

(See **Investigate Adolescents’ Situation** for guidance on questions to investigate when planning and implementing programmes for adolescents).

**Support**

At least one, and ideally two facilitators should work together to support one Adolescent Circle.

## Building a strong Adolescent Circle

### Getting started

Any group of adolescents needs support in forming a Circle. This is true of adolescents who have newly arrived in a community or just joined a programme, and are meeting each other for the first time. It may also be true of a group of adolescents who have been participating in activities together for some time, but have not yet had a chance to get to know each other, build trust, or feel connected to each other as a team.

The **Planning Activity Phases** section of the Facilitators’ Guidance outlines steps that you can take and activities that you can use to work with adolescents to forming a strong, supportive Circle according to a pace that works for them. One valuable step you should take is helping them to agree to and use **group rules**.

### Setting group rules

In addition to setting goals for what they will do and achieve together, adolescents should form group agreements for *how* they will participate in their circles and work together. Adolescents coming together as a Circle should have a chance to discuss and agree to their rules during one of their first sessions together. The **Agreeing to group rules** activity can be a useful tool.

Giving adolescents the chance to set their own rules helps them to feel ownership of their Circle, and to feel secure as they start their work together. Group rules are also helpful when adolescents encounter challenges in their work. They provide a reference point for discussion. If possible, the group rules should be written down and posted somewhere visible during each session.

To decide their group rules, each Circle should answers to question such as:

* What will we do (or not do) to make sure that everyone feels equally included?
* Are there words, ways of talking to each other, or other actions that we agree never to use in our Circles?
* Are there things we will always do or never do in our Circles?
* Are there things we will always bring or never bring to our Circles?
* What will we say or not say, if someone says something that we disagree with?
* If someone arrives late, how will we make sure that he or she feels welcome? What should he or she do to keep from interrupting the activity that we are already doing?
* If someone shares ideas or something they have made (such as a drawing or collage), how will we make sure they feel encouraged and respected?
* How will we talk with others outside our Circle about what we do in our sessions? Are there things that we discuss in our Circle that we agree to keep private or confidential?

Give adolescents a chance to use their own ideas as they discuss and agree to their rules. However, make sure that the rules are consistent with human rights principles, especially inclusion and non-discrimination. The **Group rules** tool gives more examples of rules that could work well for Circles in different phases.

As Circles continue in any of the four phases, members should take time for the **Reviewing group rules** activity to discuss their progress in using their rules. Just as with setting and reviewing group goals, new Adolescent Circles (in the Starting our Circle or Knowing Ourselves phases) may find it helpful to include a brief review of rules as one step in a session. Circles that have been working together for some time (such as those in the Connecting or Take Action phases) may find it helpful to take an entire session to review and possibly revise their group rules.

Facilitators may also suggest that an Adolescent Circle review their group rules if they have faced difficulties or disagreements while participating in activities together, or if any member feels hurt or excluded. Adolescents in the Circle can to refer to their own agreements, to recognize when they have and have not successfully used the rules and to discuss possible changes. They can clarify, change, add or even remove rules from their agreement. This also provides adolescents with an opportunity to review what they have learned and accomplished.

# Tool: Dos and don’ts for setting group rules

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|  | * Remind adolescents to develop rules that ensure that all adolescents have a chance to participate and benefit equally from activities; Remind them to consider identity issues such as ethnicity, gender, religion and language ***[Insert icon for include all adolescents]*** * Encourage adolescents to discuss how they will welcome new members to the Circle * Prompt adolescents to consider how some actions or practices could make their Circles less welcoming to some adolescents than others – For example, opening a session with a prayer or recitation from one religious faith may make adolescents from other religions, or those who do not practice a religion, feel less welcome; and -playing a physical game without adaptation might make adolescents with a mobility-related disability feel less welcome ***[Insert icon for Reach out to the most vulnerable adolescents.]*** |
|  | * Agree to a rule that will allow adolescents to insult, dominate or bully anyone, or exclude other adolescents (including members of the Circle and others who want to join) |

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**Sample rules for new Circles: Starting Our Circle or Knowing Ourselves**

**In our Circle we always:**

* Try to come on time and stay for the whole session
* Try to pay attention and participate in activities
* Help anyone who arrives late to participate
* Speak one at a time, and listen actively when someone else is speaking
* Use body language and words to show kindness and respect, especially when someone is sharing ideas, a project, a performance, or anything else
* Encourage each other to try new things, especially things we aren’t good at yet
* Talk and do activities with everyone in the Circle, even people we don’t know or who are different from us
* Have the right not to speak or not to do something if we don’t want to
* Talk with the Circle (if we feel comfortable) or the facilitator (if we need more support) if there is something that we don’t like about our time in the Circle, and try to think of ways to make it better

**In our Circle we never:**

* Interrupt or distract each other from the activities
* Interrupt someone who is speaking, or keep others from speaking by talking too long
* Use body language or words that are insulting, disrespectful or mean, especially when someone is sharing ideas, something they made, or a performance
* Discourage each other from trying something new or practicing something they aren’t good at yet
* Refuse to work with someone else in our Circle or act as if we don’t want to work with them
* Force anyone to share ideas or speak if they don’t feel comfortable.
* Keep silent about our feelings, if there is something we feel bad about in our circle.

# Tool: Sample rules

**Sample rules for advanced Circles: Connecting or Taking Action**

**In our Circle we always:**

* Come to every session if possible – When we can’t come to a session we let others in the Circle know why we aren’t there, and that they can still work on activities and projects without us
* Participate actively and positively in our activities and projects
* Share our ideas and opinions openly and respectfully
* Support and encourage others to share their ideas openly and respectfully
* Are willing to work on different kinds of projects and activities, including things that are not our own idea and/or tasks that we don’t like – We take turns with different types of roles and tasks
* Speak and behave in ways that are kind, respectful and encouraging to everyone in the Circle
* Work together and try to find a solution if we disagree or have different ideas
* Speak with each other if something is bothering us, and try to find a solution – If we are not comfortable speaking with the whole group, we talk with the facilitator in private
* Keep private or personal things about other Circle members confidential, especially if they or the facilitator asks us to
* Plan, work together and choose project ideas in a fair and equal way that reflects and includes everyone’s ideas

**In our Circle we never:**

* Speak or behave in a way that is unkind, disrespectful, discouraging or unwelcoming to anyone
* Share anything we learn or hear about another Circle member with other people outside the Circle if it is private or personal, especially if they or the facilitator asks us to respect their confidentiality
* Keep silent about our feelings if there is something happening in our Circle that we do not like or agree with

## Supporting Circles

Facilitators play a key role in shaping strong Circles. They help adolescents feel safe in their Circles, so that Circles become a space where adolescents recover from difficult experiences, take a break from stress, and feel welcome and valued by others. A strong Circle is a place where adolescents can express their thoughts and opinions, explore ideas, experiment, and try new things without feeling embarrassed. In a strong Circle, adolescents may turn disagreements and disappointments into positive relationships and learning.

Some of the most important things facilitators do to support adolescents in building safe, strong Circles are to plan sessions and activity phases that create structure and routine for adolescents, while also giving them the opportunity to have fun, learn, and take action. Strategies and steps for those important aspects of a facilitator’s role are included the other sections of the Facilitator’s Guidance. In all of their work with and for adolescents, facilitators should always:

* Use **Ten Key Approaches** to support adolescents’ wellbeing, learning and positive engagement with each other and the world around them;
* Communicate regularly with their programme coordinator and ask for support when needed;
* Communicate regularly with adolescents adults in the community, with support from the programme coordinators (see **Involve adolescents and the community**);
* Fulfil the responsibilities outlined in the job description or terms of reference for a facilitator in their programme, and uphold the code of conduct for facilitators (See S**ample Code of Conduct for Facilitators** for ideas of what this might include);
* Ask programme coordinators and adolescents for feedback on their efforts as a facilitator, and look for opportunities to learn and grow in their role. (See **Great Facilitator Checklist** for ideas about what this might include.)

Facilitators should also be aware of some of the challenges and opportunities that may arise and when they can or should take specific steps to help adolescents keep their Circles strong and safe. The Talking about sensitive topics and Keeping circles safe tools provide some strategies to help facilitators navigate some of the challenges that can arise when working with adolescents, and to transform them into positive opportunities for adolescents whenever possible.

# Tool: Talking about sensitive topics

An Adolescent Circle is a space where adolescents can discuss and explore topics that interest them. These could include any topics, from sports and entertainment to current events to academic subjects. Adolescents may also raise topics that can be sensitive in some contexts, such as:

* Romantic relationships, dating and marriage;
* Gender roles, relations or identities;
* Sexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and other sexual identities;
* Sexual and reproductive health, pregnancy, safe sexual activity, contraception, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases;
* Personal experiences of violence, rape, sexual violence and violence associated with armed conflict;
* Political and social issues, including conflict dynamics and peacebuilding;
* Religion, ethnicity or other group identities.

It is important that adolescents have a chance to engage in constructive, open discussions about subjects that they wish to raise, even those that may be considered sensitive, inappropriate or uncomfortable in their context.

**Programme coordinators** should take the following steps to ensure that adolescents can talk about these topics safely and with the support that they need for a constructive, helpful, open discussion that supports their learning and development.

**Recognize that** **adolescents have a right to information about matters that concern them, and ensure that facilitators, programme coordinators, and others in the community understand your shared responsibility to uphold these rights.** Article 13 of the CRC states that: *The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Facilitators and programme coordinators should:

* Highlight children’s right to expression with adolescents, steering committees representatives and other community members;
* Include sessions for adolescents on their right to expression and information, and share information regarding the CRC.

**Agree on topics to discuss with adolescents.**  Work with adolescents, facilitators and steering committee representatives and other community members to agree on the topics that will be explored during sessions, and how they will be addressed.

* Establish a written agreement with the steering committee that outlines the session topics, and how they will be explored with adolescents.
* Maintain open communication with programme stakeholders and program coordinators about topics discussed during sessions once they are underway (in line with privacy agreements and with adolescents’ permission). Maintaining transparency can help to prevent any suspicion or misunderstanding.
* Organize a constructive conversation between adolescents and adults if they have different views about topics that should be discussed (and how they should be discussed). See the **Community dialogue** activity for guidance.

**Programme coordinators and facilitators together should:**

**Establish clear guidelines and procedures regarding adolescents’ privacy, confidentiality and mandated reporting.** Communicate these with programme stakeholders and the wider community.

* Consider establishing a **privacy agreement** with adolescents that outlines how (if at all) information discussed during sessions is shared with others. Take into account:

* + Whether adolescents feel that privacy is important, relevant or helpful for their work and activities;
  + Whether adolescents will feel more comfortable raising issues, asking questions, sharing experiences, or exploring new topics if there is some type of privacy agreement;
  + How privacy can be integrated within the group rules that adolescents establish for working together respectfully and supportively; (See **Agreeing to group rules** for guidance.)
  + Adolescents’ ability to understand and social maturity levels; For example, younger adolescents (e.g. those ages 10-14) may not be mature enough to maintain privacy agreements;
  + Cultural norms in relation to privacy.
* Make sure that confidentiality standards and mandated reporting procedures reflect inter-agency standards, particularly in the areas of child protection, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, as well as local regulations and policies.
* Share guidelines, procedures and privacy agreements with adolescents, and make sure they know if, and how, anything they discuss during sessions is shared with others.

**Facilitators should:**

**Be ready to respond if adolescents raise challenging topics.** Promote constructive, open discussion of challenging topics that adolescents raise. Be ready to support them, and to discuss their feelings and responses.

**Be ready to:**

* Recognize and manage any discomfort;
* Avoid lecturing or preaching (as it is not conducive to discussion of sensitive topics);
* Take steps if adolescents’ disclose that they have been affected by violence;
* Ask for support if you need help responding to particular issues.

**Provide adolescents with access to accurate information about topics that interest them.**Identify where and how adolescents can connect with useful information.

* **Do** share accurate information and promote constructive discussion of challenging topics.
* Don’t withhold information, spread wrong information or express views that do not promote equality for all adolescents.
* Always keep the **10 Key Approaches** in mind.

# Tool: Keeping circles safe and strong

Watch and listen to ensure that adolescents interact in positive ways and try to identify problems early on, before they become difficult to resolve. Take action to transform these situations into positive opportunities.

**Keeping Circles safe**

In any Circle, adolescents will occasionally disagree or argue. They may insult each other, speak insensitively, or treat each other unkindly. Adolescents need support to learn from these moments, so that they can resolve their conflicts and develop positive working relationships.

Use the steps below to work with adolescents to solve their problems. However, remember that some challenges may require extra resources and support. **Make sure to follow the last set of steps if problems continue or worsen.**

**If an adolescent isn’t interacting with others:**

* Encourage them to join the others.
* Introduce them to other adolescents with similar personalities or interests.
* Encourage other adolescents to actively welcome them into their activities.
* Speak with them privately. If there is a problem, try to resolve it so that they can participate confidently in the circle. If not, support their choice to participate quietly or passively, remembering that this may be part of their adjustment or recovery process.
* Recognize the warning signs of severe mental health issues or emotional distress, and follow guidelines for linking adolescents to the appropriate services.

**If an adolescent insults or mistreats someone:**

* Take action to stop their insults or unkind behaviour immediately, but try not to single them out or embarrass anyone involved. Do not react dramatically or escalate the situation.
* It may help to move the adolescents involved away from each other. Do this in a way that it doesn’t seem like they are being punished or scolded.
* Take time outside the Circle to talk privately with the adolescents involved. Try to find out what happened and what led to their behaviour. Ask each of them for their perspective.
* Work with them to brainstorm ways that they can change their behaviour and repair their relationship.
* Give them the opportunity to resolve the problem in their own way (if they want to).
* Encourage the Circle to be safe and include everyone, and ask the other members to share their own hopes for a safe Circle.
* Remember that if you *don’t respond* to unkind behaviour within the Circle, the adolescents will understand this as support.

**If a group of adolescents has an argument or disagreement:**

* Try to let them resolve the conflict themselves, using the skills they have developed.
* Get involved in a conflict if adolescents appear very angry or upset, seem stuck in their disagreement, and/or if it seems to be getting worse. Shouting, crying, insults or threats are clear signs that a conflict has become too difficult for the adolescents to handle, and that they need support.
* Give the adolescents involved in the argument a chance to calm down. It may be helpful to move them to different parts of the space so that they can take a break from each other. Ask one of them to help with a different task so that they can step away without embarrassment.
* **Always inform the programme coordinator if there is a risk that the argument might turn into physical violence inside or outside the session.**
* Follow up later to support the adolescents in addressing their conflict. In most cases it is best to start with a private, supported discussion between the adolescents involved. However, stronger Circles and more mature adolescents may want to include all of the Circle members in the reconciliation process.
* Recognize that conflicts are part of any relationship, and are an opportunity to learn. Remind adolescents that they should be proud of their ability to learn from conflicts, and not see them as weakness or failure.

**If adolescents continue to insult or mistreat each other:**

* Keep an open line of communication with all of the individuals involved. Let them know that you are concerned.
* Consult them individually, outside the sessions if possible. Try to find out why they are behaving this way and ask all of them for their perspectives.
* Consider using the **Reviewing group rules** activity as a way to involve all of the adolescents in strengthening the Circle. Create new rules to help the Circle to work better together, and discuss how the members can support each other to follow the rules.

**If conflicts continue, or escalate too quickly to take the above steps, ALWAYS:**

* Make sure the programme coordinator is aware of the problem. Consult them before developing any major response to the issue.
* **Follow programme guidelines for the adolescents’ protection, if there are concerns about their health, safety or wellbeing.**
* Consider informing parents and asking for their support.
* Try to keep adolescents informed if seeking support from their parents or other community members.
* Consider accessing outside services or support that might be helpful, such as counselling or mediation.
* Encourage adolescents to practice activities that reduce stress.
* Encourage adolescents to feel positive about receiving outside help, and to see it as a way of being cared for and valued by others.
* Recognize that facilitating adolescents is challenging, and that requesting extra support does not mean you have failed in your role.

1. *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*,1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)