

Inclusion through Traditional Circle Games

～ Nancy Blanning

*Let's make a circle,
Make a circle 'round the sun.
Let's make a circle
That includes everyone.*
(Traditional)

Circle time is an essential activity in our Waldorf early childhood classrooms. As teachers we work hard to make these movement times imaginative, artistic, and engaging through pictures of the seasons, of practical life and spiritual truths. We are gratified when the children enter with anticipation and expectation of what will come in the imaginative journey we are taking together through gesture, active movement, song, and speech.

Circle time is a regular activity in our mornings that we strive to call into being as a part of our rhythmic flow. Yet we know that some days are more successful

than others. Some children are more responsive than others. In our post-pandemic days now, even what used to be ordinary moments can be a challenge, and circle can be particularly problematic. Teachers consistently report that the isolation and social restriction of the pandemic have created a serious developmental gap for the children. They are highly individualized. Through lack of social experience, they have not developed the social skills and awareness of the group that in pre-pandemic times we could build upon. Children have not been able to practice being social or to recognize and enjoy others. The children seem bewildered by what collective times—circle, snack, story, play interactions—ask of them.

Additionally, with the pandemic came the collision of the urgent call to acknowledge and counter discrimination and exclusion across race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender identity and expression, and

more. How do we acknowledge the beauty, dignity and worthiness of every human being in our school communities? How do we invite and practice inclusion?

We can look to traditional circle games as a bridge, both to address the pandemic deprivations and to offer playful and developmentally appropriate experiences of inclusion.

When traditional ring games are offered, children always respond with enthusiasm. Children love these games. Even our socially deprived little ones will step into the ring and be carried along. What is going on? What gets their bodies to move and touches their hearts to override their reluctance to join in?

“Circle games” or “ring games,” whatever we call them, are an enduring part of childhood culture and tradition. These games are a heritage which has been passed down from generation to generation in villages, towns, and cities. The “ring” can be as few as two people, such as in a hand-clapping game, or can embrace many in a large circle. The ring moves through the guidance of rhythmic movement and speech, gesture, and song. In the simplest games, everyone moves together, imitates the same gesture, and sings the same song. These games acknowledge that everyone has a place in the ring; everyone is included. In moving, gesturing, and singing together, a social unit is also formed.

Long-time Waldorf early childhood educator, Ruth Ker, has authored the WECAN publication *Please, Can We Play Games?* Ruth has the heritage of these games from her own Canadian childhood and has researched them deeply. The contents of this book can help us understand how these simple games—with circling, falling to the earth, weaving, connecting to one another, leaving the ring and then returning—touch the children’s pre-earthly memories deeply. The introduction to this volume describes the richness these games offer, and is recommended as a valuable resource for all kinds of games.

The circle is a timeless, cosmic image—the circle of the zodiac, the circling pathways of the surrounding planets, the yearly circling of the earth around the sun. The circle is eternal and is always inclusive. A place for every individual is always standing in readiness; their bodies just need to come in and fill the space. The circle is said to remind the children of the spiritual,

cosmic world from which they descend when they come into a physical body.

Out this vast circling comes a moment of falling down—*kerplop*, into a physical body and incarnation. The beloved traditional game “Ring around the Rosie” follows this pattern. “Sally go ‘round the sun” (Ker, p. 68) follows this pattern of circling with a sudden stop, a jump, and a “whoop!” to say “Here we are!” In the Dutch game, “Ringle, Ringle, Coxes” (van Haren 1990, p. 23), is pictured a universal experience of coming to earth from the spiritual world. And in the ring, we are all included, moving together, bringing all of our different selves to do the same movements, synchronizing our breathing together to sing the song. There is no exclusion because the circle is infinitely flexible and embracing.

Such games additionally support healthy sensory development, particularly of the four foundational senses of touch, well-being/life, self-movement, and balance. Circling, rocking, jumping, and falling strengthen both balance and self-movement. We can develop tolerant touch by holding hands. Circling and jumping and falling bring laughter and luster to the cheeks, showing a happy life sense. On subtle levels, when these physical senses are strengthened, there are also social virtues birthed.

- Trust through healthy touch
- Tolerance through healthy life rhythms and predictability of care
- Compassion and empathy as self-movement becomes an internal capacity to “move” with and be moved by the experiences of others
- Equanimity and a sense for justice through balance (Blanning 2022, 22-26)

Many circle games also depict practical work activities in life. These games acknowledge and honor human work. Workers represent more than the literal work they perform, as serious scholars have confirmed, including those such as Rudolf Steiner who look from a spiritual perspective. Professions also represent different parts of our human selves. We are spinners when we think thoughts. We weave together a tapestry of life through our biographies. We are transformers and “alchemists” when we cook, transforming the raw food stuffs into nourishment for body, soul, and

spirit. When as kitchen helpers and servants we tend the cooking fire to maintain transforming warmth, getting our faces smeared with soot and ash, we tend our inner fire to transform ourselves into our most true form—a magnificent, radiant being who has been in disguise but is now recognized.

Recently a teacher proclaimed, “But those games are so morbid!” She was thinking about games that have associations with dying or a literal mention of death, such as “Ring around the Rosie,” which is associated with the Black Death, another traditional verse, “Old Grumbler is dead. . .” and “Wally, Wally Wallflower. . .” (Ker 2018, 80-81). When we look at these words with modern, literal eyes, we recoil. But when we can allow ourselves to consider the more vast and cosmic pictures that are seen standing behind them, the doorway opens for a different appreciation. Children are not literalists, and they love to go around the ring, fall, and then get up—again and again and again. They tremble in delight to lie on the floor as Old Grumbler and then jump up with joy, surprising the old woman picking up apples. Their celebration suggests that they are experiencing something that our intellectual approach to life has lost sight of.

There is one more “wondering” about how circle games can help us repair social damages from the pandemic. Circle games develop in a progression from a unified circle where everyone does the same (appropriate for our youngest children) and then develop in complexity (van Haren 1990, 18-21). As intentional research, we can trace our way back to these very simple games and their forms to gather the children together. Their young developmental selves are at a stage of these simple games where they move easily. Offering these simple games, and building up from there, offers the opportunity to fill in what they missed. It is a therapeutic principle that when a disruption in development has occurred, we look back to where the development stopped and starts to build up from there with what would have been appropriate activities. These simple ring games for our socially deprived children may be just the place to start. We can scoop back to fill in the gap of deprivation and bring them forward toward more typical and expectable sensory and social interaction.

The circle awaits everyone and holds everyone. It is naturally inclusive by its very form. All skin colors, all gender expressions, all abilities, all sizes, all voices are welcomed. The children are carried by our joy and conviction that what we are offering to them is physically and socially healthy and spiritually true. Moving freely and laughing is balm for our adult human souls as well.

*A tisket, a tasket,
A green and yellow basket.
I wrote a letter to my love
And on the way I dropped,
I dropped it, I dropped it.
And on the way I dropped it. . .*

Now, dear teacher, pick up these games, and put them in your pocket. ♦

References

- Blanning, Nancy (2022). “Movement toward Tolerance.” *WECAN Gateways Journal*, No. 83. Chestnut Ridge, NY: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.
- Ker, Ruth (2018). *Please, Can We Play Games?* Chestnut Ridge, NY: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.
- Van Haren, Wil and Rudolf Kischnick (1990), *Child’s Play 1 & 2*, Stroud, UK: Hawthorn Press.

In exploring sources of circle games, the online resource of bethsnotesplus.com was discovered. There are free resources of traditional circle/singing games from many diverse populations. This looks like an exciting collection for us to investigate. <https://www.bethsnotesplus.com/2012/12/circle-games.html>

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