
Inviting Imitation through Circle Time

— Stacie Warren

For a circle to engage the children, I have learned that the circle must resonate deeply within the teacher. Only our relationship with the circle will draw forth their own willingness to journey with us. By creating my own circles, I have learned to meet the specific needs of individual students and the changing dynamic of each class as a whole. Self-created circles come from a place within me that speaks more vividly to the children. That makes it easier for me to memorize the circle and brings forth the imagery in my actions. As they encounter these authentic actions that come out of my self, the children are much more comfortable entering my imaginative world.

To create consistent expectations, each circle has a simple pattern.

- Coming together (same song and action each time)
- Big movement to integrate into body, leading us into a journey
- Rest
- Spring up with a surprise or a movement that tickles the children
- Rest
- Big movement/journey
- Rest (same verse and action each time)
- Awakening, with an individual child touching each child with the “Waking Wand”

Each circle has a definite beginning and ending to give a breathing-in and breathing-out rhythm. We begin with the same song, with which we join hands and walk around the circle together.

Because we play Ring-Around-the-Rosie type games outside, the act of joining together in a circle is familiar and reminiscent of a joyful activity. Students for whom holding hands is not pleasant are given options to walk alongside us and join back in as soon as we’ve stopped holding hands, or to hold a shirt tail or sleeve instead of hands as long as their neighbor agrees. Honoring individual needs invites more children to participate.

Including movements that speak to our children is important. Many young children are quite impulsive, struggling with their body’s boundaries. To help these

children feel the extremities of their being, our circle starts with great stomping and clapping/knee-slapping movements after the opening song. This draws their awareness into a more manageable space within and around them. For a quieter alternative, we might squeeze our arms and legs like a tube of toothpaste the full length of our body so that we may move out of our heads and into our bodies. This “full body hug” requires children to cross midlines, builds body geography, and provides proprioceptive feedback for sensory-seeking children.

Now that we are in our bodies, we can move out of the circle by galloping, flying, crawling, tiptoeing, gliding, walking backward, or whatever the moment calls for. This traveling segment is accompanied by a repetitive song that aligns with our movement, one that then may be seen repeated in their independent play again and again. We journey around the tables and back to the circle rug, transitioning into a resting position on the circle carpet.

During this short resting period, we may be hiding from a wild beast, or could be trees waiting to sprout out of our seed jackets. Sometimes we are covered by a white sheet of “snow” falling on us or a brown blanket of “soil” by the hands of the assisting teacher. This invites calm after our big movement. Then we might emerge from our hiding spot or sprout upwards into big movement again. The middle movement is usually one that tickles the children or provides a child or two the opportunity to choose an imitative movement.

The movements that tickle the children include changing the pace, such as starting something very slowly and going faster and faster and then slower and slower. Children also love the opportunity to show off their skills, such as balancing on one foot or stretching to their tallest selves. Additionally, children love crawling through tunnels and caves (under a table with a silk on top), being rolled up like a cocoon in a blanket (older children can do this to each other in teams), spinning, pretending to be animals, walking over lava across a narrow bridge (the balance beam), stepping across a stream on stepping stones (large blocks arranged across the floor), tiptoeing through the snake’s nest (small branches or a rope laid across

the floor in a random pattern), or climbing a mountain (step stools/chairs/stumps/small tables staggered up and then down), etc. All of these activities build their gross and fine motor capacities, help them integrate into their bodies, give variety, build their imaginations, provide proprioceptive feedback, and keep them fully engaged.

Children love opportunities to be imitated and love to be given the chance to choose a movement to be followed by all. This might look like asking a different child each day to choose how we will travel on our journey, or to choose an animal to imitate. This gives children the opportunity to command attention in an appropriate way, and keeps them attuned to who might be chosen next. Some children might choose to watch many times before joining in. Honor their process and incorporate their help if possible, such as holding onto one side of a silk with your assisting teacher while their peers crawl under it, rubbing backs while we are in a resting position, and so on. Empowering them lets them be part of the circle, inviting their inclusion in a comfortable way.

After this second period of movement, we come back into calm. Perhaps we “freeze” in a position that requires balance on one foot or roll into a ball

backward like a roly-poly. In a few calm moments, we will have a big movement again, such as the journey back (going the opposite direction as the first journey). Once we return from this journey, we come back for a final calming end to our circle, with the same verse and action each time. This definitively signifies the end of our circle and allows time for our hard efforts to sink deeply into our being. During this calm, the assisting teacher will rub our backs (with the children’s permission). Then one student will be in charge of gently tapping each quiet child with our “Waking Wand” to wake us from our rest. ♦

Stacie Warren *is the founder and lead teacher of Sunflower House Preschool in Colorado Springs, CO, a nonprofit Waldorf-inspired preschool program. She began as a mainstream third grade and early childhood special education teacher. When introduced to Waldorf education, everything resonated deeply and led to her completing the Early Childhood teacher program at Gradalis. Stacie brings her observation skills and insights from special education into her Waldorf teaching.*
