

how-to guide to

circle of concern

MAKING
CARING
COMMON
PROJECT



GRADES

6–12

IMPLEMENTED BY

Teachers or community leaders

TIME & RESOURCE INTENSITY



CAPACITIES PROMOTED

Empathy; Perspective-taking; Relationship-building; Shifting school norms

Overview

Helping students develop greater empathy is essential for building a positive school climate, but equally important is considering *who* students have empathy *for*. Children and adults alike are predisposed to empathize for those who are in their own social group.ⁱ For example, “jocks” may have empathy for other jocks, but not for “nerds.” Boys may have empathy for other boys, but not for girls. Sometimes children lack empathy for their peers who are socially challenged or have disabilities. Empathy for many different kinds of people is important in its own right *and* is the basis for children’s developing conceptions of and commitments to fairness and justice. The *Circle of Concern* exercise is designed to help children – and adults – become more aware of those for whom they don’t have empathy. It is also designed to widen their circle of concern.

The exercise is simple. Students are first presented with a set of 2 concentric circles and then are asked to reflect on who is in their widest circle. Students write down the names of people in each of these circles, and then categorize the individuals within those circles (e.g., friends, family, etc.). Next, students consider whom they didn’t write down (e.g., custodial staff, bus driver, school secretary, etc.). Typically this activity focuses on people who are affiliated with schools, but can certainly be expanded to encapsulate those in students’ greater family and community.

Key Elements

Make visible stereotypes that can inhibit empathy.

A *Circle of Concern* activity helps students – and teachers – see biases and stereotypes that often go unspoken.

Reflect on assumptions individually *and* as a class.

A *Circle of Concern* activity begins with each student individually writing out and reflecting on their relationships with other individuals and groups, yet the exercise expands to include whole-group discussions.

Continually revisit the circle of concern.

A *Circle of Concern* activity is most effective when it is revisited on a regular basis – ideally once a month during an advisory period – so that conversations about relationships, stereotypes, and community become normal practice of the class.

Key Benefits

Gives students and adults avenues to understand and improve empathy.

Degree of Difficulty

The circle of concern is moderately easy to do.

A *Circle of Concern* activity introduces opportunities for groups to discuss inclusion, exclusion, stereotypes, empathy, and fairness in ways that motivate individual and group action steps toward increasing community cohesiveness and justice.

To get the most from a *Circle of Concern* activity, you need:

- A consistent group of students who meet regularly
- 45 minutes
- An adult facilitator who is comfortable leading a sensitive discussion

ⁱ Cikara, M. & Fiske, S.Y. (2011). Bounded empathy: Neural responses to outgroup targets' (mis)fortunes. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 23(12), 3791-3803.

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Objectives

- To develop students' empathy.
- To help students notice who is in and out of their circle of concern.
- To help students widen their circle of concern.
- To help students take prosocial actions based on a widened circle of concern.



Time Required

- 45 minutes, ideally repeated once a month
- Follow-up, as needed



Materials Required

- A space conducive to discussion (e.g., a classroom where chairs can be easily arranged into a circle); Bulletin board, white board, or posters with student names posted
- Student journals (e.g., either notebooks/pens or a laptop on which students can keep a running journal)
- Flip chart paper or whiteboard
- Markers



Advance Preparation

- If using a circle of concern template (refer to attached template), make enough copies for all students.
- If using electronic journals, make sure that you have given careful thought to where students will save their files. Files should be saved in a place that preserves students' privacy (so that they can write freely), but they should also be easily accessible for subsequent sessions.
- In addition to the initial session, try to schedule follow-up sessions for the same grouping of students to reconvene approximately once a month. Also consider a culminating end-of-year reflection.



Other Considerations

- Circles of concern can be abstract concepts, even for adolescents. To help ground your discussion, spend some time before facilitating this exercise reflecting on who is inside (and outside) of your own circle of concern. Be prepared to share your general thoughts about your own circle of concern.

Implementation

STEP ONE: UNDERSTANDING CIRCLES OF CONCERN (15 minutes)

This step is only needed the first time you lead this activity.

Arrange chairs in a circle and begin by explaining the concept of a Circle of Concern. (A Circle of Concern is a group of people that we think about, care about, and interact with in ways that are kind and thoughtful.)

To illustrate for students, use a large piece of paper or the whiteboard to draw a stick figure to represent yourself. Around “you,” draw a medium-sized circle. This is your circle of concern. Within the circle are people who are closest to you. Write the names of these people. Next, draw another concentric circle outside this circle to represent those who are just outside of your circle of concern. Explain that we all have circles of concern and that they look different for everyone. Because circles can be confining and inclusive, we also have people who are outside our circles of concern.

STEP TWO: IDENTIFYING CIRCLES OF CONCERN (15 – 20 minutes)

Ask students to journal for 5 minutes in response to the following question:

- *Who at school (or in the community, if this is being done in a non-school setting) is inside your circle of concern?*

Next, ask students to write for another 5 minutes in response to this question:

- *Who at school (or in the community) is not currently in your circle of concern?*

If students have difficulty thinking of groups that might have been left out, prompt them to think about groups of peers (e.g. athletes, artists, students with disabilities, immigrants, boys, girls, etc.) and groups of adults (e.g. bus drivers, custodians, administrators, teachers, coaches, etc.)

Finally, ask students to pick 1 – 2 people that they listed as being outside their circle of concern. Have them write a few sentences in response to the following questions:

- *Why are these people (or groups) outside your circle of concern?*
- *How might their being outside your circle of concern affect them? How might it affect you? How might it affect the community as a whole?*

CONSIDER THIS

Another way to help explain the concept of a circle of concern is to share an example of groups of people who are in (and outside) your circle of concern.

CONSIDER THIS

If this activity is being done in a non-school setting (like an afterschool program), modify the prompts to ask about groups of people and adults in the neighborhood or community.

CONSIDER THIS

As an alternative to writing paragraphs, you may also invite students to write names on a graphic organizer. See template at the end of this guide.

Invite 3 – 4 students to share insights from their written reflections. Afterward, be sure to thank them for sharing.

STEP THREE: TAKING ACTION(15 – 20 minutes)

- ✓ Ask students to name groups of people in the school community that they listed in Step One (both inside and outside their circle). Write down students' ideas. Once you have a list, ask students to think about groups that they may have missed or left out. Add these groups and ask students to reflect on why they left these groups out. Have students begin to think about how they can be more aware of and appreciate all members of the school community.
- ✓ Ask students to consider how their circle of concern might be expanded. Write down their responses for all to see. Possible student ideas include:
 - Saying hello to people they do not usually talk to – for example, new students or the custodian.
 - Learning the names of the cafeteria workers and then thanking them by name.
 - Organizing a “mix it up” lunch where students are encouraged to sit with people they do not know.
- ✓ Read the list aloud and then ask students to imagine how actions like these might change the school community:
 - *Why expand your circle of concern? Why does it matter?*
 - *What would the benefits be? What would be easy or hard about taking actions like these?*
- ✓ To conclude, ask students to journal about two things:
 - One action they will take in the next 24 hours to reach out to one person or group outside their circle of concern.
 - One other action they will take in the next week to reach out to a different person or group outside their circle of concern.

CONSIDER THIS

It may be easier for you to collect journals and redistribute them during follow-up sessions instead of having students keep their journals.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Reflection Activity (15 – 20 minutes)

This step is not done during the initial session

Ask students to spend 5 minutes reviewing their journal entries from the previous session (especially the actions they committed to take after the last session).

Next, ask students to respond in their journals to the following questions:

- *Did you take the actions that you committed to in the last session?*
- *If so, what were the results? What were the reactions of the person or people you reached out to? How do you think your action made the person feel? How did it change things for them or the community?*
- *If not, why? What obstacles stood in your way? What, if anything, would have made it easier?*

Hand out copies of the 'FOLLOW-UP' worksheet. Give students 5 minutes to answer some of these questions. Bring the group together and discuss their responses to each question.

To conclude the session, hand out copies of the 'MAKE A PLAN' worksheet ask students to journal about (1) one action they will take in the next week to reach out to a new person or group of people and (2) one action they will take in the next month to reach out to a different person or group of people.

Repeat Step Four for as many follow-up sessions as possible.

End-of-Year Reflection (30 – 45 minutes)

Bring students together in a circle to discuss the following questions:

How has learning about your circle of concern changed the way that you feel about this community?

- *What was easy about working to widen your circle of concern? What was difficult?*
- *Have you widened your circle of concern?*
- *How has widening your circle of concern changed the way that you think and act?*
- *Who remains outside your circle of concern and what do you think you can do to change that? What will be most challenging?*
- *How can we encourage other students to widen their circles of concern?*

The last question can prompt a discussion about expanding this activity to other advisories, grades, or groups in the school. Below are several ideas for extension opportunities that can be easily adapted or modified.

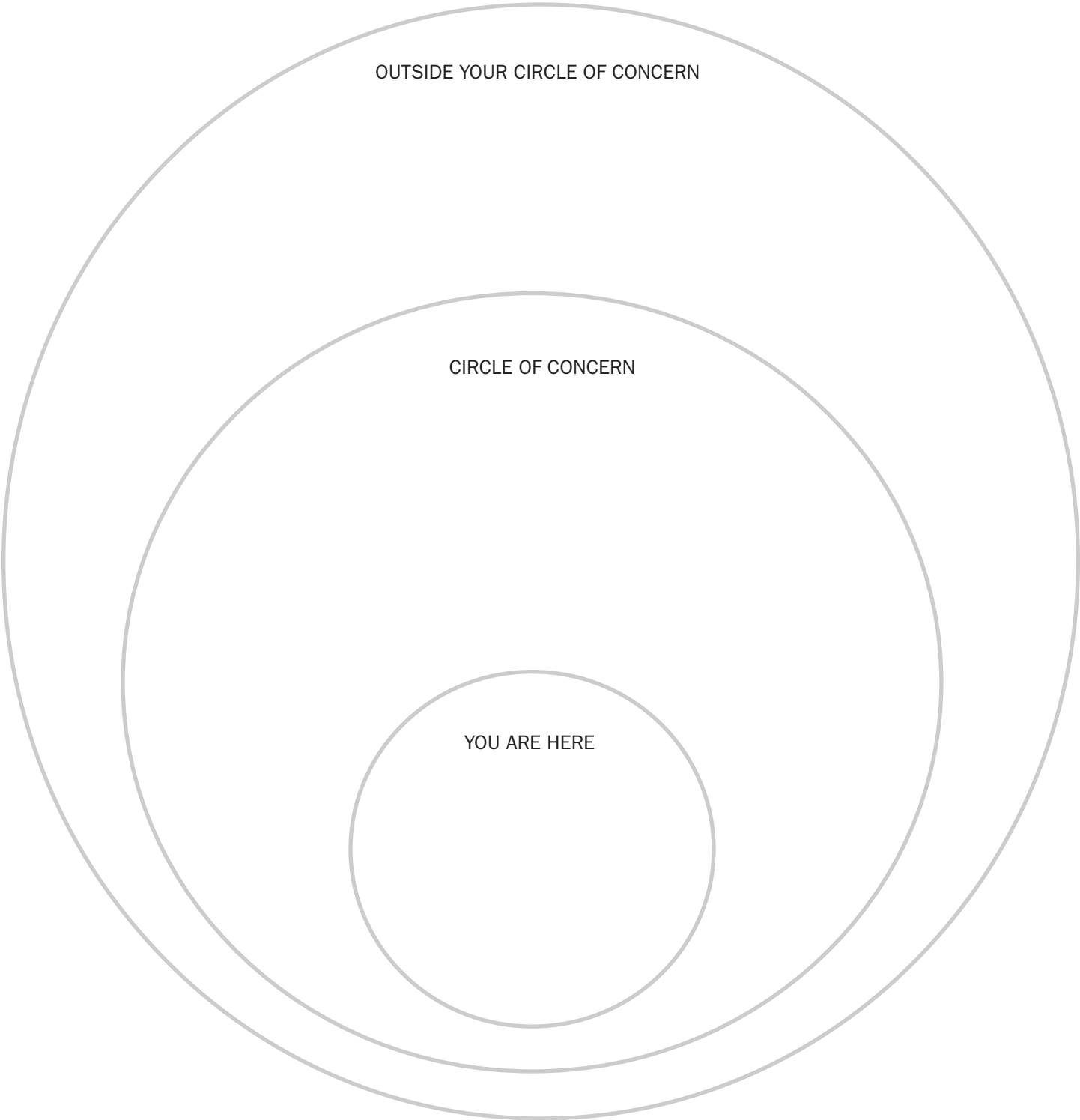
Extension Activities

Think about adopting a social media awareness campaign such as a page on the school website or blog where students can share actions they have taken to expand their circle of concern. You could also do this on a school bulletin or poster board. If there is enthusiasm for expanding this Circle of Concern activity, ask for volunteers to lead the work and make a personal commitment to support them.

Think about organizing a classroom or school level commitment to expanding your circle of concern.

Students can decide on actions they will take and set goals. Encourage students to create a poster or visual reminder of their commitment and their progress.

CIRCLE OF CONCERN GRAPHIC ORGANIZER TEMPLATE



REFLECTION WORKSHEET

1. Was it easy or challenging to follow through on your commitments to reach out to people outside your circle of concern? Why?

2. If you followed through, how did it make you feel? How did it make others feel?

3. If you encountered challenges, what could you do individually (or could we do as a community) to overcome those challenges?

4. Why does expanding our circle of concern matter? Do you believe these actions are changing our community? If so, how?

5. What other steps can we, as a community, do to widen our circles of concern?

MAKE A PLAN

1. What is one action you will take in the next week to reach out to a new person or group of people?

2. What is one action you will take in the next month to reach out to a different person or group of people?

Consider these follow-up questions if you have extra time:

- Do you think it will be difficult to follow through with these actions? If so, what steps can you take to accomplish this action?

- How do you think this action will affect you? How will it affect others?

- Can you think of other things you could do to include others or reach out to a new person or group of people?

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