

MAKING  
CARING  
COMMON  
PROJECT



# Strategies and Lesson Plans Virtual Circle of Concern

Grades 6 - 12

Making Caring Common

**Caring Schools Network 2019 - 2020**

Updated March 2020

# Overview

## Recommended time

- 15-35 mins per lesson
- Five lessons in total, one lesson per week

## Materials and advance prep

### Materials

- An online space conducive to discussion (e.g. Zoom meeting)
- Slide deck with teacher's completed circle of concern diagram
- Student journals (e.g., either notebooks/pens or a laptop on which students can keep a running journal)

### Advance preparation

- If using a circle of concern template (see [Appendix 1](#)), send the document to 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.

## 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

## Why this matters

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 with those who are in their own social group. 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 lack empathy. It is also designed to widen their circle of concern.

## 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.

## Extension Strategies

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 for those actions. Encourage students to create a virtual poster or visual reminder of their commitment as they progress.

# Lesson 1: Understanding Circles of Concern (15-20 minutes)

## Introduce the strategy (5-10 minutes)

Once all students have joined the online meeting, begin by explaining the concept of a circle of concern. A circle of concern is a group of people we think about, care about, and interact with in ways that are kind and thoughtful.

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

To illustrate for students, use a PowerPoint with a stick figure in the middle 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. These might include, for example, your students, colleagues, and family members. Next, draw another concentric circle outside this circle to represent those who are just outside of your circle of concern. These might include the person who delivers your mail or someone who works at your local coffee shop.

***MCC Tip:** Facilitators may want to place in the outer circles of concern folks primarily beyond the school community and/or from their personal lives.*

## Group discussion and reflection (10-15 minutes)

Once you have illustrated and explained who is in your circle of concern, have the students discuss the following questions:

- Why do you think these people are inside my circle of concern?
  - What does it mean for me and for them that they are inside my circle of concern?

- Why do you think these people are outside my circle of concern?
  - What does it mean for me and for them that they are outside my circle of concern?
  - How might this affect the community as a whole?

## Lesson 2: Identifying Circles of Concern (25-35 minutes)

**MCC Tip:** *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.*

### Introduction (10-15 minutes)

Ask students to journal for about five 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 five 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 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 one or two people 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?

**MCC Tip:** *As an alternative to writing paragraphs, you may also invite students to write names on a graphic organizer. See [Appendix 1](#) at the end of this guide.*

## Small group work (10 minutes)

There are two options for small group work:

If possible, create online breakout groups of four or five students. Ask students to share and discuss their circle of concern diagram with the group (either via a chat function within the meeting or via a group email). If students cannot take a picture, have them hold up their diagram for others to see. Within these small groups students can also share their responses to the questions in the Introduction activity.

Alternatively, create an online document (e.g. a Google Doc) that is shared with the group. As students complete their diagram, have them take a picture and upload it to the shared document. Allow students to comment on others' diagrams, and encourage each student to monitor comments others make on their diagram.

## Sharing (5-10 minutes)

Once everyone has finished in their small group discussion, transition back to the whole group conference call. Invite students to share insights from their written reflections or from their small group discussion. Afterward, be sure to thank students for sharing.

## Lesson 3: Taking Action (15-20 minutes)

### Opening discussion (5 minutes)

Ask students to name groups of people in the school community they listed in Lesson 2 (both inside and outside their center circle). Record students' ideas in a shared, online list. Once you've compiled the shared list, ask students to think about groups they may have missed or left out. Add these groups and ask students to reflect on why they left out these groups. Have students begin to think about how they can be more aware of and appreciate all members of the school community.

### Student reflections (10-15 minutes)

Ask students to consider how their circle of concern might be expanded. Write down their responses in a shared document or using a new slide in your slide deck. It's important for students to have access to this list in the future. Possible student ideas include the following:

- Emailing to say hello or thank you to people they do not usually talk to – for example, new students or the custodian.
- Organizing a virtual “mix it up” lunch where students are encouraged to reach out to and get to know people they normally wouldn't sit with in school.
- Making care packages for nurses, elderly neighbors, or people whose jobs require them to place their own health or safety on the line.
- Offering to shop for groceries for senior citizens in their neighborhood.
- Supporting local businesses by buying gift certificates to use at a later time.
- Looking for ways to support workers who have been laid off.
- Thinking about how to show gratitude to people whose jobs make them vulnerable - for example, grocery store workers, bank tellers, food service workers).

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.
- An additional action they will take in the next week to reach out to a different person or group outside their circle of concern.

## Lesson 4: Reflecting on Circles of Concern and Making a Plan (15-20 minutes)

*Prior to this lesson, be sure to email the [Reflection Resource](#) and [Make A Plan Resource](#) to students.*

*Repeat this lesson for as many follow-up sessions as possible.*

### Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Ask students to spend five minutes reviewing their journal entries from the previous lessons, especially the action(s) they committed to take after the last lesson.

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

- Did you take the actions 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?

Ask students to refer to the Reflection Resource. Give students five minutes to answer each question listed in this document.

### Small group work (10 minutes)

Separate groups into online breakout discussions or work collaboratively on an online document to discuss students' responses to each question.

If time allows, conclude the session by asking students to refer to the "Make A Plan" resource and journal about the following:

- One action they will take in the next week to reach out to a new person or group of people.
- An additional action they will take in the next month to reach out to a different person or group of people.

## Lesson 5: End of Year Reflection (15-20 minutes)

### Debrief and Reflect (10 minutes)

At the end of the year, bring students together in a final video conference 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?
- How 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?

### Closing discussion (5-10 minutes)

The last question can prompt a discussion about expanding this activity to other advisories, grades, or groups in the school.

## Appendix 1: Circle of Concern Template



## Appendix 2: Reflection Resource

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

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

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

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

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

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## Appendix 3: Make A Plan Resource

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

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

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

3. Do you think it will be difficult to follow through with the action you chose to take? If so, what steps can you take to accomplish this action?

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4. How do you think this action will affect you? How will it affect others?

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5. Can you think of other actions you could take to include others or reach out to a new person or group of people?

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