



What Is a Closing Circle?

It used to be that at 3:30 every afternoon, our classrooms would erupt into chaos. Children chatted away; backpacks were strewn in one direction, lunchboxes in another; notices and class work were scattered over the floor.

As teachers, we were incredibly frustrated. During the day, we put so much thought into building a positive learning environment from arrival time to group discussion to individual work. We even took steps to make sure lunch and recess were peaceful learning times for the children.

But at the end of the day it all fell apart. The students, and we ourselves, would end up leaving school feeling frazzled, as though nothing had been tied up before everyone ran out the door.

Things began to change when we learned about closing circles. Here was a strategy that allowed us to end the day with structure, sanity, and a strong sense of community.

Now, at the end of the day, we guide students in packing up and doing their classroom jobs. Then, with their backpacks on or placed behind them, the children gather in a circle on the rug. Going around the circle, each student says something about some activity or learning from the day, or the group plays a quick game.

Simple, but as we say good-bye to each student at the door, we feel calmer and more energized, and we can tell that the children feel the same.



A closing circle is a strategy for bringing a peaceful end to the school day. It doesn't take very long—students gather for five to ten minutes to do a brief activity or two and then go on to dismissal—but it has a big impact on students' learning and behavior and the classroom climate.

Many teachers begin the day with a morning meeting to set a tone of community and engaged learning and to launch students into the day's work with pleasant anticipation.

A five- to ten-minute closing circle wraps up the day on a similarly positive note. Whether students had a good day or a tough day, a closing circle can help build trust and cooperation in the classroom. This safe environment enables students to take risks so that they can do their best learning.

Wrapping up the day this way benefits the teacher, too. A hectic dismissal can leave teachers feeling exhausted and unproductive, even if the majority of the day went smoothly. After using closing circles, many teachers report more positive energy and attitudes not only in their students, but in themselves as well.

In short, closing circles can help students learn better and teachers teach better. It's a small investment of time that makes a big difference in the life of the classroom.

In this book, we offer fifty tried and true closing circle activities. But first, some basics about this strategy.

What Do Children Do in a Closing Circle?

What takes place during the few minutes of a closing circle can vary from class to class and from day to day. Here are just a few things a class might do:

- Sing a song together
- Think about an accomplishment from their day
- Set a personal goal for the following day
- Play a game
- Send a friendly good-bye around the circle

The choice depends on the children’s developmental abilities, your personal style, and, importantly, the kind of day the class had (see “Choose Activities Purposefully” on page 6 for more).

The common thread that runs through these activities is their focus on the positive. A closing circle is not the time to address problems going on in the class or to make class decisions. Those tasks can wait until the next day. Rather, it’s a time to wrap up the day in a way that leaves students feeling calm, competent, and upbeat about their learning.

(If the class has a problem that needs solving, use a collaborative problem-solving strategy at a time of day other than the closing circle. To learn about such strategies, see *Solving Thorny Behavior Problems: How Teachers and Students Can Work Together* by Caltha Crowe, 2009, or free articles on this topic, all available at www.responsiveclassroom.org.)

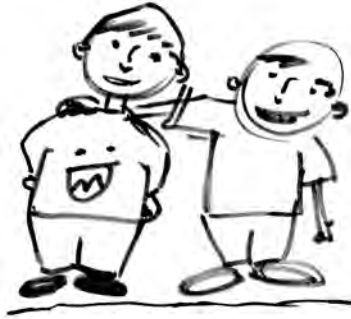
The Benefits of Closing Circles: A Closer Look

How exactly do closing circles help build a positive classroom environment?

They allow children to celebrate accomplishments.

Many things, large and small, are worth celebrating over the course of a school day. Learning a new skill, completing a challenging assignment, practicing a fire drill in record time, and showing kindness to a classmate are just a few examples. Pausing to note these important day-to-day accomplishments helps cultivate a positive classroom environment. But with

all the demands teachers face each day, we often feel that we don't have the time. Setting aside a few minutes at the end of each day ensures that these happenings don't go unnoticed.



They give children a chance to reflect on learning.

As many educators know, children can deepen their understanding and stretch their thinking skills when we lead them to think back on information they took in, question its validity, make connections, draw conclusions, or plan for next steps. It's hard in today's fast-paced, jam-packed classrooms to always have time for this kind of reflection unless we deliberately plan for it. Building in time for reflection during a closing circle is one way to ensure that this happens.

They help children gain a sense of belonging.

To take the risks necessary for learning, children need to feel a sense of belonging and significance. Knowing this, many teachers strive to create that powerful atmosphere of community in the classroom. At the close of the day, singing a song together, playing a math review game, or sharing how the class overcame an obstacle are just a few ways that this sense of community can be strengthened.

Choose Activities Purposefully

When choosing or adapting ideas for your class, keep these things in mind:

Consider what kind of day the class had.

- Was it a smooth day? A rocky day?
- What academic or social skills did the class especially focus on?
- What content are the students studying right now?

Like any classroom activity, closing circle activities will benefit students the most when you use them purposefully—to reinforce skills they’re working on, to give them a lift when their energy is flagging, to help restore community when needed, or to meet other goals.



For example, if the class worked hard on a math skill, they might celebrate their effort with a class cheer such as “Give This Group a Hand” (page 50). Or they might do an activity that reinforces the math skill, such as “Did You Know?” (page 44).

If the day was particularly challenging, you might choose an activity that helps

children focus on envisioning a positive start to the next day (for example, “Make a Wish,” page 90).

Think about students’ skills and capabilities.

Each activity in this book is labeled with a suggested grade range. Consider these labels as you choose activities. Keep in mind, however, that the labels provide just a general guide and that every class is unique. Observe your class and consider where they are in their development. And don’t be afraid to look outside your grade range for ideas—some activities labeled for other grades could work well for your particular class. Certainly if you teach second or third graders, be sure to check out the activities in both the K–2 and 3–6 ranges.

Also remember that you can adjust virtually any activity to make it appropriate for your students’ needs. Often by simply changing the questions you pose or modifying one step, you can decrease or increase an activity’s level of sophistication.

Finally, you’ll see many activities labeled K–6. These are likely to work as written for all elementary grades. But even with these broadly useful activities, you may want to adjust a detail or two to fit your class’s needs.

Make each activity your own.

When using any of the activities in this book, don’t feel tied to the exact movements or tune. If you don’t know the tune of a song, just chant the words to a beat. Honor student contributions and create special variations that are unique to your class. The important thing is that you make each activity meaningful for the students you’re teaching.

Choose short activities when time is tight.

Rushing through an activity usually means losing its effectiveness. So on especially busy days, try to do end-of-day tasks earlier in the day and choose short activities for the closing circle. For example, if on certain days the class doesn't return from a special until five minutes before the end of the day, you might have the children pack up before they go to the special and then do just a simple group good-bye or group cheer (such as "Circle of Hands," page 38) when they gather for the closing circle during those last five minutes. Even a quick reflection or celebration can provide a meaningful closure to the day.

Don't be afraid to repeat activities.

Children, especially in the younger grades, often enjoy doing the same activities over and over, so coming back to old favorites time and again can be very effective.

More Keys to Successful Closing Circles

Protect those five to ten minutes.

You don't need a lot of time to have an effective closing circle: five to ten minutes should do it. But you do need to protect this time from intrusions. Otherwise, the gathering will feel rushed rather than calm and uplifting.

It's true that in today's classrooms, carving out five to ten minutes can be challenging. But with some planning, end-of-day routines will be efficient, clearing out enough uninterrupted closure time. For ideas, see "Seven Ways to Find 5–10 Minutes" on page 13.

Make sure everyone takes part.

For a sense of community, every student and adult in the room should participate in closing circles. This is not a time for children to finish assignments or to complete end-of-day jobs.

Teach closing circle routines.

As with any classroom procedure, closing circle expectations and routines need to be carefully taught if children are to do them successfully. Here are the closing circle skills that students most commonly need to be taught. (Even if you've taught similar skills for morning meetings or other activities, it will be helpful to reteach or review them for use in closing circles.)

- **How to know it's time for the closing circle.** Is it when you ring the chime or when a bell rings over the loudspeaker? Is it whenever students complete their end-of-day jobs? Whatever the signal, teach and practice it with students.
- **What to do with belongings.** Children usually pay better attention if their hands are empty and their belongings out of sight. So teach them where to park

A Simple Way to Teach Routines

For many of the closing circle routines listed here, children will need to see the routine modeled and then practice it under your guidance. Interactive Modeling, a strategy of the *Responsive Classroom*® approach to elementary education, is a quick and effective way to do this teaching.

To learn more about Interactive Modeling, see page 18.

A Final Good-bye

As students leave the room, stand at the door and say good-bye to each of them. Some teachers give each child a high five or a peace sign, or do the class's secret handshake. This personal touch takes so little time yet adds so much to each child's feeling valued.

backpacks and papers before coming to the closing circle. If students need to have their belongings nearby, teach them how to put those things behind their bodies, outside of the circle.

- **How to form a circle.** Have a dedicated space large enough for everyone to sit together in a circle. Then teach how to form the circle efficiently. Some teachers,

especially of younger grades, assign seats in the circle. Some have students sit alphabetically or by dismissal routine (walkers together, bus riders together, etc.). Others let students choose their seats. Whatever your method, make sure everyone understands and knows how to use it.

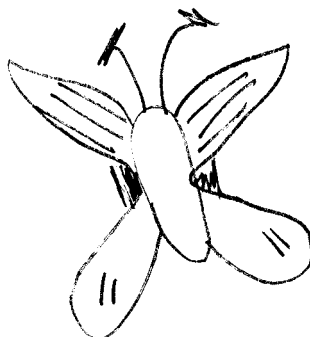
- **How to respond to signals.** How will you signal during a closing circle that it's time for the student who's speaking to give someone else a turn or that you need everyone's quiet attention? Some teachers use a chime, a rain stick, or a raised hand as the signal. Choose something that will work consistently in your classroom, decide how children should respond (for example, quickly wrap up their conversation, get quiet, and look at you), and teach them these expectations.
- **What the general rules are for any activities you do.** Think about rules for who goes first and last, who is next, and so forth. Teach these before they come into play in closing circle activities.

- **How to transition from the circle to line-up.** You might call out categories (“Anyone wearing purple may line up” or “Anyone who likes strawberry ice cream may line up”). Or you might play a game such as Pop-Up Number (children count around the circle to a designated number—for example, three; each child who says “three” pops up and gets in line). Also decide where students should line up and what standing in line in a safe and friendly way looks and sounds like. Then teach these routines to students.

Carefully choose the open-ended questions you ask.

Many of the activities in this book have the teacher posing an open-ended question about the day for the children to answer, either out loud or privately. In either case, make sure your questions are meaningful to the children by thinking about their interests and the academic and social skills they’re working on.

Be careful to avoid questions that could cause or fuel social problems among the children. For example, in a sixth grade class that’s struggling with cliques, asking the children to rate how the class as a whole is doing in this area could be divisive. A more effective approach might be to ask the children how they personally did on a concrete act of inclusiveness. For example, “How did you do on saying good morning to a large number of classmates during arrival time today?”



Anticipate a variety of responses to questions.

Think ahead about the types of responses students may give when you prompt reflection or recall of facts. In particular, be prepared for two common situations that can sometimes be challenging:

- **Students respond that something went poorly for them that day.** If an individual student responds this way, follow up with her privately to see if you can help. If it seems that something is a concern for many students, acknowledge this concern by summarizing what you heard. For example, “I notice that many of you are not feeling good about recess today.” Then set a new, positive goal for the class or state how you’ll follow up with them. “Let’s set aside some time tomorrow before recess to figure out what’s going on so you can have more fun together.”
- **A student gives an incorrect answer to a factual question.** Give the student another chance to answer (ask if he’d like a clue from you or other students), or open up the question to the class. Remember that the goal is to keep closing circles cooperative and enable students to leave school feeling encouraged and competent.

Seven Ways to Find 5–10 Minutes

Right about now, you may be thinking, “Closing circles sound great. But with everything going on each day, how do I find the time?”



The key is efficiency. If you manage the end of the day efficiently, you can find a surprising amount of time. Here are seven ideas. Choose the ones that might best help you and the particular group of students you’re teaching right now. The goal: get packing up, cleanup, and all other tasks done and still have five to ten minutes left for a closing circle.

- 1 **Post a chart of end-of-day tasks.** List the tasks students need to complete so they can refer to the list as they get ready for dismissal. (In the older elementary grades, consider asking students to help generate this list. Doing so can help children feel more invested in learning the end-of-day routines.)

However you create the list, keep it as short as possible. Consolidate similar details to end up with a general list that will apply to all students each day. A sample:

- Put homework and notices into folder and then into backpack.
- Pack up lunch box.
- Gather coat, gloves, hat, etc.
- Carefully flip your chair over onto your desk.
- Come to the closing circle.

For younger students, you might add photos to remind them what it looks like to pack up, clean up, and be ready for the end of the day.

2 Assign and review homework earlier in the day. Some teachers do this after a morning snack, right after lunch, or when students return from a special. If the class has a slice of time between subjects and specials, use it to assign homework instead of waiting until the end of the day.

3 Assign and post classroom jobs. Not only does this help ensure that the end of the day is organized and efficient, but it also gives children meaningful responsibilities as active participants in a classroom community.

You can come up with the jobs yourself or create them with students after the first week or so of school. Then rotate students through the jobs.

However you decide to create and assign jobs, be sure that the tasks genuinely contribute to the cleaning, organizing, and upkeep of the classroom and that everyone has

a job to do. Also take the time to teach how to do each job (see “Model, Model, Model!” on page 18).

Finally, for jobs that take longer (such as stacking chairs), assign multiple students so that all jobs are finished at the same time.

Some ideas for classroom jobs:

- Pencil Sharpener
- Paper Monitor (passes out notices, worksheets, etc.)
- Chair Stacker(s)
- Chalkboard/Overhead Eraser
- Table/Desk Washer(s)
- Floor Checker (makes sure everything is off the floor)
- Computer Technician (shuts down computers)
- Librarian(s) (organizes classroom library)
- Plant Technician (waters plants)
- Animal Keeper (takes care of any classroom pets)
- Teacher Assistant (helps the teacher with any additional jobs)

4 **Note individual dismissal plans.** Make sure all students know where they’re going that day and how (bus? after-school program? parent pickup?) before the closing circle begins. Many teachers use a small chart for this purpose.



5 Play a song. Play a piece of music while students are completing their class jobs and packing up. Try “So Long, Farewell” from the movie *The Sound of Music*, “See Ya Later, Alligator,” or “Hit The Road, Jack.” The length of the song should be the length of time it takes for students to complete their tasks and gather for the closing circle. As students get to know the song, it will become a pacing aid, with the end of the song a natural signal that their closing circle is about to begin.

6 Clarify the routines to yourself. To teach students how to carry out their end-of-day routines, you first need to clarify to yourself how each routine should look. Take a moment to visualize the details (you may even want to do a dry run). Some things to think about:

- How will I signal students to start these routines? Ring a chime? Use a hand signal? Something else?
- Should students do their class jobs first or pack up their personal belongings first?
- Will students flip up or stack the chairs?
- Will they leave their backpacks at their seats or in their cubbies during the closing circle or bring them to the circle?

- Is there room for children to put their backpacks behind them at the circle?
- How will students know when they should gather for the closing circle? After a song ends? When a timer goes off? When I turn off the lights?

Even though these seem like small details, it's important to think about them so that everyone will be clear on exactly what to do.

7 Think about how to dismiss students from the closing circle.

Ask yourself these questions ahead of time:

- Will students line up at the door?
- Will they play a category game to line up (everyone whose middle name starts with A, B, or C may get in line, everyone whose middle name starts with D, E, or F may get in line, and so forth)? Or will you use some other method?
- Will students stay in the circle for bus announcements?
- What can children do while they wait? Perhaps play a quiet hand game?

Again, this may seem like a small detail, but the more you clarify your expectations, the more smoothly the end of the day will flow and the more time the class will have for a meaningful closing circle.

Model, Model, Model!

Once you've designed efficient tasks and routines, you need to carefully teach them to students so they'll know how to carry them out. Without this deliberate teaching, the most efficiently designed routines may trip students up and become time-consuming—because while you may have a clear picture of what you want students to do, they may not have the same mental image.

Interactive Modeling, a technique used in the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching (www.responsiveclassroom.org), is a simple and direct strategy for teaching routines (routines in general, not just those at the end of the day). Interactive Modeling allows students to see, hear, and experience exactly how to complete tasks. It includes seven quick steps:

- 1. Say what you're going to model and why.**
- 2. Model the behavior.**
- 3. Ask students what they noticed.**
- 4. Invite one or more students to model.**
- 5. Again, ask students what they noticed.**
- 6. Have all students practice while you coach.**
- 7. Give feedback.**

Following are two examples of the use of Interactive Modeling. For more on using this technique throughout the day, see *Interactive Modeling: A Powerful Technique for Teaching Children* by Margaret Berry Wilson, 2012, available from www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Interactive Modeling: How to Stack Chairs

STEP	MIGHT LOOK/SOUND LIKE
1. Say what you're going to model and why.	"At the end of the day, we need to put the chairs on the desks to help the custodian. It's important to do this safely and carefully. I'm going to stack this chair. See what you notice."
2. Model the behavior.	Stack the chair carefully. Do not narrate as you model.
3. Ask students what they noticed.	"What did you notice about what I did?" Students might respond, "You used both hands" or "You moved the chair slowly." If needed, ask questions such as "What were my eyes doing?" and "How hard did I put my chair down?" to prompt students to name all the important aspects of safe chair stacking.
4. Invite one or more students to model.	"Who else would like to show us safe chair stacking? OK, let's all watch Brooke and Mary."
5. Again, ask students what they noticed.	"What did you see Brooke and Mary do?" Students might respond, "They were quiet" or "They kept their eyes on their chairs so they didn't bump into each other."
6. Have all students practice while you coach.	"Now we're all going to practice stacking a chair. I'll watch to see that you do the things your classmates and I just modeled."
7. Give feedback.	"You stacked your chairs safely and carefully. I saw slow movements. I saw people avoiding bumping others and putting chairs down gently."

Interactive Modeling: How to Respond to the Signal for Quiet Attention

Using a calm signal such as a chime or a raised hand to get children's attention is among a teacher's most important classroom management techniques. It's a highly efficient and respectful way to get children's attention throughout the day, but especially at the end of the day, when students are tired and tend to have trouble focusing. Teach children that when you give the signal, they should stop what they're doing, get quiet, and look at you to hear your directions.

STEP	MIGHT LOOK/SOUND LIKE
1. Say what you're going to model and why.	"At times when I need to get your attention, I'll ring a chime. Madelyn will pretend to be the teacher and ring the chime. I'll be a student. Watch me to notice what I do when the chime rings." (Arrange ahead of time for Madelyn to help with this modeling.)
2. Model the behavior.	Walk around the room. When you hear the chime, stop moving and look at Madelyn. Do not narrate as you model.
3. Ask students what they noticed.	"What did you notice about what I did?" Students might answer, "You stopped moving" or "You turned your head to look at Madelyn."
4. Invite one or more students to model.	"Who else would like to show us what to do when the chime rings? OK, let's all watch carefully as Sandhya and Ian respond when I ring the chime." ►

STEP	MIGHT LOOK/SOUND LIKE
5. Again, ask students what they noticed.	<p>“What did you see Sandhya and Ian do?”</p> <p>Students might say, “They stopped their conversation” or “They turned to look at you.”</p>
6. Have all students practice while you coach.	<p>“Looks like you’re all ready to try responding to the signal. Turn to your neighbor and tell him or her about your favorite place, and when you hear the chime, stop and look at me. I’ll be watching for all of you to do what your classmates and I modeled.”</p>
7. Give feedback.	<p>“You all stopped and looked quickly. This will help us throughout the school day to be ready for learning.”</p>

A Last Thought

Given how packed school schedules are, doing one more thing may seem impossible. What we can tell you is that the investment in closing circles comes back to you tenfold. In the years we’ve been using closing circles in our classrooms, we’ve found students, and ourselves, leaving school with energy and enthusiasm rather than fatigue or discouragement. Other teachers who use this practice report the same. We invite you to discover for yourself what a difference closing circles can make.

