

Strategies and Lesson Plans

# Circle of Concern

Grades 6 - 12

Making Caring Common

**Caring Schools Network 2021 - 2022**

Updated July 2021

# Overview

## Recommended Time

- 15-35 mins per lesson (Use the pacing suggestions or timestamps to adjust, depending on time available)
- Five lessons in total, one lesson per week

## Materials and Advance prep

- Materials
  - A space conducive to discussion (e.g., a classroom where chairs can be easily arranged into a circle); bulletin board, white board, or chart paper
  - Student journals (e.g., either notebooks/pens or a laptop on which students can keep a running journal)
  - Printed (or electronic) copies of Appendix 1-3
  - Markers
- Advance preparation
  - If using a circle of concern template (see [Appendix 1](#)), 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.

## 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. It is equally important to consider 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 don't have empathy, and to support widening 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.

## Extending This Strategy

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 or classroom bulletin. If there is enthusiasm in multiple classrooms, think about organizing a grade-level or school-level commitment to expanding circles of concern. Students and staff can work together to decide on actions they will take and set goals. Furthermore, if your class continues working towards expanding their circle of concern, consider having students create another circle of concern a few months after completing the strategy to track if their work is supporting the growth of their circle of concern.

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

## Introduce the Strategy (5-8 minutes)

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 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 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. 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 a cashier at a local shop. You can also refer to the template in [Appendix 1](#).

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

## Group Discussion and Reflection (5-6 minutes)

- 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?

## Personal Reflection & Whip-Around (8-10 minutes)

Next, pass out the circle of concern template in [Appendix 1](#) (or have students make their own) to each student. Instruct students to spend 2-3 minutes brainstorming who is in their circle of concern and who is not. Let students know that the class will have more time to add to this over the next few weeks and today is just to start reflecting on who comes to mind immediately.

In the last 4-5 minutes, do a whip-around and ask students to share someone that is in their circle of concern with the class. If you notice any themes in what students shared (e.g. most students named a family member, sibling, close friend, etc.) share it with the class.

Wrap-up the lesson by asking students to either turn in their circle on concern sheets or to keep it for the next lesson as they will add to it with a focus on their circle of concern at school and in their communities.

# Lesson 2: Identifying Circles of Concern

## (25-35 minutes)

### Introduction (15-18 minutes)

Let students know that you will be continuing your reflection on their circles of concern. Return students' circle of concern sheets (or have students take them out).

Tell students that they will be adding to their circles of concern using different prompts, and that they will share their responses with a small group later in the lesson. Introduce each of the prompts one at a time, giving students 2-3 minutes to respond to each prompt before moving on. Keep track of time, and try to have students use two different colors for their journaling - one color for school-based prompts, and one for community-based prompts.

- Who at school is inside your circle of concern?
- Who at school is not currently in your circle of concern?
- Who in your community is inside your circle of concern?
- Who in your 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, cashiers, servers, 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?

### Small Group Work (8-10 minutes)

Ask students to form small groups of four or five and share their circles of concern with each other, as well as their reflection. Have them share sentences from the responses they wrote to questions in the Introduction activity.

## Whole-Class Debrief (5 minutes)

Bring the class back together for a whole-group debrief. Ask students to share insights from their reflections using the following discussion prompts:

- Did anything stand out to you in your individual or group reflections?
- Did any groups notice patterns in your circles of concern? What might these patterns tell us?

## Lesson 3: Taking Action (25-30 minutes)

### Opening Discussion (5-6 minutes)

Ask students to name groups of people in the school community they listed in Lesson 2 as inside their circle of concern. Do the same for those outside their circle of concern. Have a volunteer write down students' ideas into two lists on the board. Next, ask students to think about groups they may have missed or left out, and add this to a third list on the board, 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.

### Individual and Whole-Class Reflections (12-15 minutes)

Give students five minutes to individually reflect on the following prompts. Remind students that how they show attention and care to others, and how they feel seen and acknowledged is influenced by many factors, including family experiences, community norms, and cultural expectations. Ask students to reflect on their backgrounds as they answer the following prompts.

- What makes you feel cared for, seen and acknowledged by others?
- How can you personally expand your circle of concern at school?

Next, engage in a whole-class discussion for 8-10 minutes.

Ask students to share ideas for expanding their circle of concern. Have a student volunteer write down their responses on the board. Possible student ideas include the following:

- 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?



## Action Plan (8-10 minutes)

Next, give students three to four minutes to journal about two things:

- One action they will take in the next 24 hours to reach out to one person or group at school outside their circle of concern.
- An additional action they will take in the next week to reach out to a different person or group at school outside their circle of concern.

For the final three to four minutes of class, pair students with an accountability partner to share action plans and check in with each other about their progress and commitment to these actions.

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

## Introduction (10-12 minutes)

Begin the lesson by sharing that students will start by reflecting on the actions they took, or had journaled about, in the last lesson to expand their circle of concern at school. Hand out copies of the “Reflection Resource” ([Appendix 2](#)) to all students. 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, and answering the questions on their “Reflection Resource.”

Next, engage in a whole-class discussion using the following prompts:

- Can someone share the actions they took to expand their circle of concern at school?
- What were the results of your actions? 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 you did not take the actions you journaled about, why not? What obstacles stood in your way? What, if anything, would have made it easier?

## Action Plan (10 minutes)

Next, hand out copies of the “Make A Plan” resource (see [Appendix 3](#)) and ask students to spend five minutes journaling about the following:

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

Next, have students pair up with their accountability partner from the previous lesson to share their action plans and reflect on their success with actions from last week.

Repeat this lesson for as many follow-up sessions as possible, focusing on expanding circles at school as well as in students' communities.

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

### Debrief and Reflect (10 minutes)

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

- How has learning about your circle of concern changed the way you feel about this community?
- How have you widened your circle of concern?
- What was easy about working to widen your circle of concern? What was difficult?
- 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?

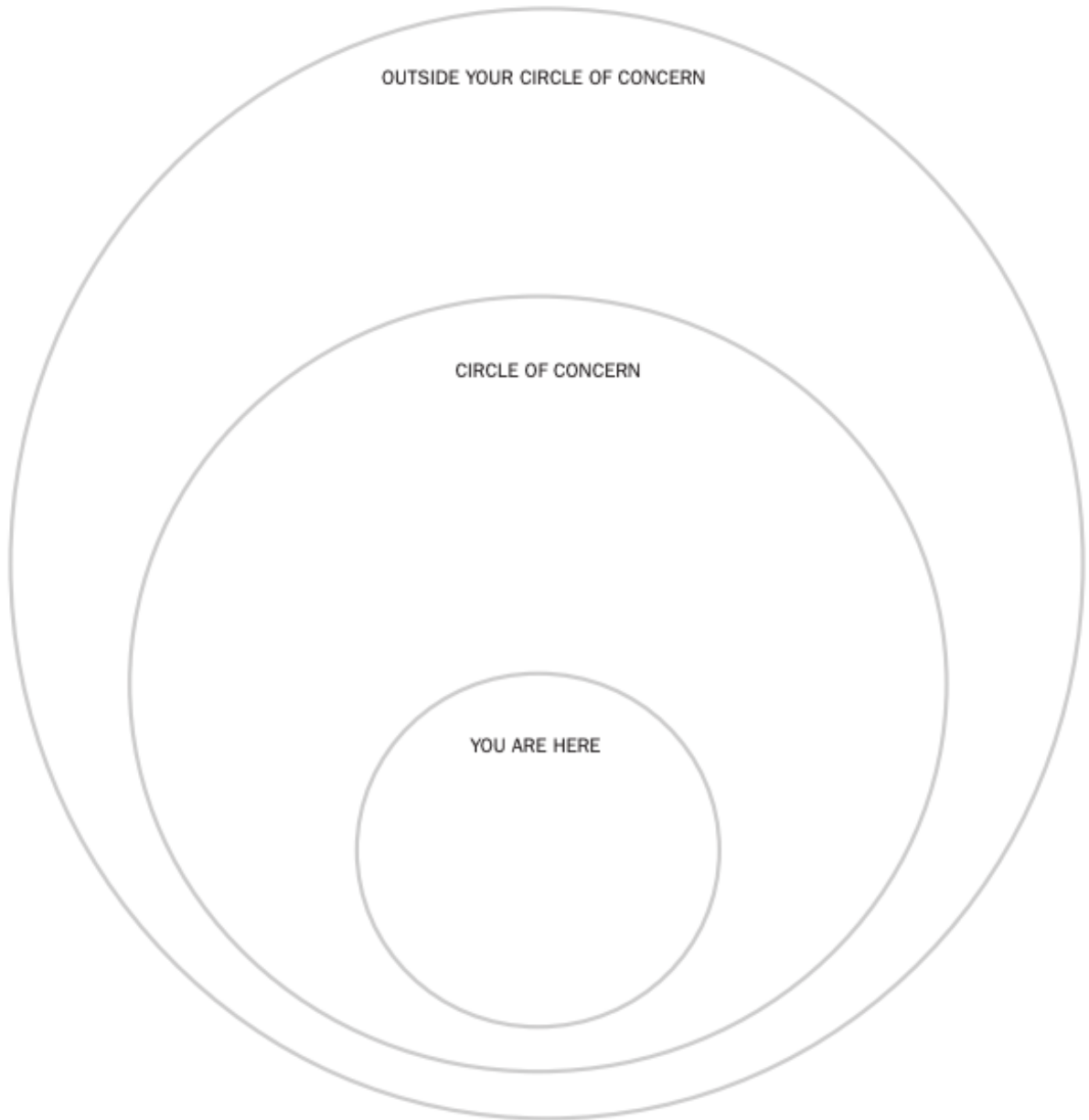
### Closing Discussion (5-10 minutes)

Discuss the following question as a group to prompt a conversation about expanding this activity to other advisories, grades, or groups in the school.

How can we encourage other students to widen their circles of concern?

Close the class by thanking students for taking on the work to expand their circle of concern. Share that it is a continuous process that the class will support each other with.

# 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 do you think it made 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

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

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