

# Ohio Juvenile Justice Promising Practices: Peace Circles

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## Who Can Participate in Peace Circles?

Summit County has four types of Peace Circles and has trained 65 volunteers:

- *Diversion: (13 Circles):* Youth charged with non-violent offenses can be referred to Peace Circles by an intake officer. After intake, the family is invited to participate in a Peace Circle. If a family successfully completes the Peace Circle process, the youth can avoid formal processing in the juvenile court and have their case dismissed. A family can choose not to participate at any time and have the case handled formally by the court.
- *Transition:(1 Circle):* Targeted toward youth returning from out-of-home placements, including DYS facilities, 90-day detention stays, or substance abuse programs, these circles focus on successfully transitioning youth home. Transition circles focus on support and linking youth with community programs.
- *Community: (5 Circles):* These circles focus on negative behavior in the community that has not risen to the level of formal juvenile court charges (i.e. a youth throwing rocks) and serve as an alternative to arrest.
- *School-based: (54 Circles):* The school-based circles are in place in three high schools in the county and are helping to create a positive school environment and to intervene with disciplinary issues before juvenile court involvement.

## What is the Peace Circle Process?

Once a youth and family agrees to participate in the process, a group is formed to participate in the circle that includes two trained volunteer Peacekeepers, the youth, and the youth's parent(s) or guardian; additional participants can include law enforcement officers, the victim, the youth's siblings, and other community members. The process can take from 6 weeks to 6 months depending on the youth's progress through the five phases:



- Welcome: All group members are introduced and given guidelines and values for the Circle, including that the circle is a safe, confidential space and attendance/availability expectations.
- Storytelling: All group members share something about themselves to establish relationships with each other.
- Accountability: The group members discuss the offense, including how the youth's actions affected others. The group then discusses and reaches a consensus about what should be done to right the wrong, such as; writing an apology letter, volunteering, joining a prosocial organization or attending school.
- Monitoring: The group meets to monitor the youth's progress on the consensus accountability goals and determines if the youth needs additional assistance meeting those goals.
- Celebration: Celebrating the youth's successful completion of the goals.

## How Were Peace Circles Developed?

The Peace Circles were supported from a grant from the Ohio Department of Youth Services through the Disproportionate Minority Contact (“DMC”) initiative. (“DMC”) is a national initiative designed to develop strategies to address well-documented disparities among youth of color coming into contact with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system.

In Summit County, the (“DMC”) Stakeholders group has a Peace, Justice, and Equality Committee that is required to address juvenile delinquency prevention, and system improvement efforts to reduce the overrepresentation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system. This Committee includes a variety of community representatives, such as youth from nearby communities, representatives from the public school system, grassroots and community leaders, and organizations that provide community activities and do outreach with youth.

## How Successful are Peace Circles?

In 2014, Summit County completed a total of 15 Peace Circles, including one transition circle, one community circle and thirteen completed diversion circles. The Court has collected some data on the Peace Circles process as outlined below and a more in-depth evaluation is being conducted by an independent consultant; this fact sheet will be updated to include information gathered through this evaluation.

Diversion Circles: The Court collected data on the diversion circles, which focused on a variety of offenses, with the highest offense being theft. Most of the youth participants were Black males.

According to exit interviews with the youth, youth were skeptical about the Peace Circle process at first with 70% of youth rating their willingness to participate in the Peace Circle at a 3 or below on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 indicating being very willing to participate in a circle). However, after the process was over, all youth expressed that they were happy that they participated; felt respected, and felt that the process was fair. 80% of youth also said they strongly believed that the Peace Circle would improve the situation that brought them to attention of the court. Youth said that participating in the Peace Circle “gave my family an opportunity to open up and express their feeling[s]” and that the youth “learned a lot of things to keep me out of trouble.”

Education Circles: From October-December 2014, all ninth grade students in three Summit county high schools participated in school discussion circles - a total of 98 students of various ethnicities. The circles covered a wide range of topics, including the importance of education, bullying, respecting authority, conflict management/crime prevention, and self-esteem.

Before the circle, over half of the students said they did not want to participate or were unsure of participating; however, after the circles 90% of students were glad they participated and 98% said they learned something from the circles. Students reported that the circles helped them recognize there were people who cared about them and wanted them to succeed, how to communicate better, and how to handle conflict. The students also enjoyed being able to express themselves and hearing others’ perspectives. The education circles will be rolled out to additional schools in the upcoming months.

*This fact sheet was developed collaboratively by the Summit County Juvenile Court’s Peace, Justice and Equality (PJ&E) Initiative and the Juvenile Justice Coalition. For more information, contact PJ&E Co-Chairs Ken Jones and Keysha Myers ([pje@cpccourt.summitoh.net](mailto:pje@cpccourt.summitoh.net)) or Erin Davies with the JJC ([edavies@jjohio.org](mailto:edavies@jjohio.org)).*