



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 100 volunteers:

- *Diversion (76 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 (13 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.
- *Education (124 Circles):* These 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?

From 2014-July 2016, Summit County completed a total of 94 Peace Circles, including thirteen Transition Circles, five Community Circles and 76 completed Diversion Circles. Moving forward the goal is for the Peace Circle practice to become embedded in the culture of the Summit County community as a means to effectively communicate, resolve issues in a non-adversarial way, and build healthy relationships.

Diversion Circles: The Court collected data on the Diversion Circles, including the number of Circles by zip code, the number of youth by race and sex, and the types of offenses addressed in Circles. In 2015, 37 youth were referred to the Circles and 26 of those youth successfully completed the Circles. The majority of the participants were African American youth. That same year 62% of youth who participated in a Circle did not have a new charge. The Circles included offenses such as assault; disorderly conduct; unruly charges; criminal trespassing; theft; and obstructing official business. Youth who participated in the Circles reported that the Circle would improve the situation and felt that they were treated fairly and with respect.

Education Circles: For the 2015-2016 school year, the Peace Justice & Equality Education Sub-Committee collaborated with Akron Public schools to coordinate School Discussion Circles for all ninth grade students in three high schools - a total of 213 students of various ethnicities. Specially trained Prevention Specialist in the schools led the Circles, which covered the importance of education, conflict resolution, community violence, respecting authority, and self-esteem.

At the conclusion of the Circles, 98% of students reported feeling respected and like they could talk with other students and staff. Students at the Circles reported a variety of positive outcomes, including respecting themselves and others/other perspectives, how to cope with stressful situations and conflict, and communication skills. The staff who led the Circles reported that they were able to form better relationships with students, who were more willing to talk to them about school-related issues, and that the Circles helped create a positive school environment.

The Education Circles have been so successful at the three existing schools that they will be rolled out to all Akron Public School High Schools next year, with plans to expand to five Middle Schools in the fall of 2016. The Middle School Circles will be led by specially trained school Security Officers and will be utilized as a means to resolve conflict, and as an alternative to suspension/disciplinary sanction. Going forward there are plans to continue to expand community partnerships and train youth leaders as Peace Keepers to help facilitate Middle School Circles.

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 Keysha Myers and Rashara Walker (pje@cpccourt.summitoh.net) or Erin Davies with the JJC (edavies@jjohio.org).