

# BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

VOICES OF OUR YOUTH: POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

TEACHER GUIDE

A collaboration of the Brooklyn Borough President's Office, Crown Heights  
Community Mediation Center and the New York Peace Institute



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CROWN  
HEIGHTS  
COMMUNITY  
MEDIATION  
CENTER



## **Message to School Administrators and Teachers**

In response to recent public safety tension following widespread protests of policing practices and the assassinations of two NYPD officers, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams has initiated a series of discussions around police-community relations. These dialogues will inform a report of recommendations with the goal of advancing public safety citywide, as well as police and criminal justice reforms. The first part of this initiative is a series of digital dialogues with students selected from high schools throughout Brooklyn, in which students are responding to specific questions about the role of police, the current state of police-community relations, and suggestions for change.

This Teacher Guide was developed as a supplement to the Digital Chat session and provides a menu of activities to support student and staff reactions to the event. Some of the exercises could be a springboard for planning next action steps that the school community may want to take toward improving community-police relations.

The centerpiece of this guide is an instructional section on Talking Circles, which is a way of supporting student voices in a safe, respectful and inclusive process. We encourage teachers and staff to designate some time during the school day to continue this important dialogue with your students.

# TALKING CIRCLES

A Talking Circle is a process in which individuals can discuss issues of concern, address on-going differences and make decisions about how to work together. It creates a space that lifts barriers between people, and opens the opportunity for **connection and collaboration**. The process is rooted in many indigenous cultures and traditions, and is a form that allows a group of people to slow down, practice deep listening and think collectively.

The Circle Keeper shouldn't worry about controlling the discussion, but rather should allow students to speak openly and honestly about their feelings and concerns. Trust that they have the ability to find their own answers.

A good Circle Keeper **never...**

- Takes anything that's said personally
- Takes sides
- Passes judgment
- Dominates the conversation
- Blames or shames any participant
- Feels like he/she has to come up with the solution

## SET UP

Sitting in a circle sets a different tone from sitting in rows, such as in a classroom, or around a table or desk. Generally in those formations, there is a person in charge, one who has the most authority to make decisions for the group. It's important that the set up of the Talking Circle process be carefully constructed to support the goals of building community and encouraging honest and open dialogue. Though the Circle Keeper is facilitating the process, he/she is an equal participant in the dialogue and should be seated in the circle as one of the participants. The circle format is important because no one person is at the head, everyone is equal, and everyone can see and hear each other.

### **Physical Arrangement:**

Seat the participants in a circle so that everyone can see every face without having to lean forward. It's best to have no physical barriers between the participants. Do not place tables or desks in the center of the circle.

### **Size and Timing:**

Generally a circle consists of between 6-15 individuals and can take about 45-60 minutes, depending on the number of participants.

### **Privacy**

Talking Circles should take place in a quiet location that is separate from other people and activities separate from other people and activities.

### **The Center of the Circle**

The center of the circle is an important element. It is traditional for participants to speak to the center of the circle, the idea being that everyone's voice is added and that wisdom

from the group is larger than any one idea. Creating the center of the circle can be used as a way to ceremoniously mark the beginning of the process. Some groups arrange in the circle center a colorful cloth with an LED candle, some stones in a bowl of water, a bell, or other small objects.

### The Talking Piece

Central to this process is the use of the talking piece - an object passed from one participant to another around the circle, signaling that it is the holder's turn to speak and the others' turn to listen. As each participant holds the talking piece, he/she can choose to speak or pass the talking piece on without speaking. The Circle Keeper should emphasize the importance of the talking piece, reminding participants about its purpose and modeling how it is used by always giving full attention to the holder/speaker.

## CORE GUIDELINES

Standards of behavior are critical to the success of the Talking Circle process. One of the steps of the Talking Circle is for the Circle Keeper to introduce, model and reinforce some version of these guidelines (depending on the age of the group):

1. **Speak from the heart:** Participants should be speaking truthfully, based on their own experiences and opinions, rather than what they think others may want to hear. Can also be phrased "Speak your truth."
2. **Listen from the heart:** Participants should try to set aside their judgments about one another and listen with an open mind to what is being expressed.
3. **No need to rehearse:** Participants should not be thinking about what they're going to say when it's their turn to speak, but rather trust that they will know when the talking piece is in their hand. If you're rehearsing, it's hard to be effectively listening.
4. **Say just enough:** Participants should respect the talking piece and be mindful that everyone may want a chance to speak, so take care not to dominate the floor and take up too much time.

These core guidelines can be modified to meet the age and style of the group. Another version:

1. **One Mic:** Whoever has the talking piece has the floor; everyone else is invited to listen. Everyone will have a turn.
2. **Respect:** No name-calling or making fun of one another. Respect the sacredness of the circle.
3. **Confidentiality:** Whatever happens in the circle stays in the circle.

## STEPS OF THE CIRCLE PROCESS

### 1. Opening

**Purpose:** To create a safe and special space in which everyone comes together to share thoughts, opinions and feelings in a different way. The opening sets a positive tone and is a transition into the circle process.

**Examples:** Poems, quotes, exercises, guided meditation

**Language:** “We have come together today to learn more about one another and to be together in a circle to make our group stronger, closer and safer.”

## 2. Guidelines/Values

**Purpose:** To provide participants the opportunity to learn and remember the shared and important standards for behavior in the circle.

**Examples:** Introduce the talking piece. One mic, respect one another, confidentiality

**Language:** “Here are some core circle guidelines...what other ones you would like to add so that you feel you can speak honestly and respectfully?”

## 3. Check In

**Purpose:** To give participants a chance to say how they are feeling at the moment, physically, mentally and emotionally.

**Examples:** Hi/Lo, Name one word describing how you're feeling, What are you carrying into the room that you would like to dump before we get into our activity today,

**Language:** “I am going to pass the talking piece around so that we can all hear how everyone is doing today...”

## 4. Discussion Rounds

**Purpose:** This is the crux of talking circles. Discussion rounds allow participants to speak from a personal perspective, which in turn builds understanding and empathy among participants. Participants should be encouraged to share and tell stories during this part of the circle.

**Examples:** Prompting questions (see attached Suggested Circle Plan)

**Language:** It is important for the circle keeper to answer this question first and be genuine. Do not make up a story, but speak from the heart like you are asking the participants to do.

## 5. Check Out

**Purpose:** To invite participants to share how they are feeling right now at the end of the circle. This allows the circle keeper to read the room and allows participants to express how they feel as they go into the next part of their day.

**Examples:** Share one word about how you are feeling right now, Share something you liked about today's circle, Say three words that describe today's circle

**Language:** Do not set this question or prompt up with any expectations. Students may say things like “awesome or good” or “boring or bad.” All of these responses are okay!

## 6. Closing

**Purpose:** Similar to the opening, it allows participants to transition into the next part of the day. It allows them to celebrate and acknowledge the work they've done in this circle.

**Examples:** Poems, quotes, guided meditation, small group activity

**Language:** Express gratitude and thank participants for the work they have done, especially if it was a particularly challenging or tough circle.

# SUGGESTED CIRCLE PLAN

## Police-Community Relations

Following is a step-by-step Circle Plan that was prepared for you to use as a follow-up to the Digital Chat session organized by the Brooklyn Borough President's office on January 20, 2015. A blank Circle Plan form is included in this guide for you to use for future Talking Circles or instead of this prepared one.

### What is a circle?

- *The school understands that the issue of community-police relations is one that impacts everyone at our school and wanted to give everyone a chance to have an open and honest conversation about it. This is your time and space.*
- *To talk about it, we are going to use a process called a talking circle. Circles like this are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of the indigenous people of North America, as well as from other parts of the world.*
- *During this time, or circle, we will use different style of communication than we normally do and it may feel weird or awkward in the beginning. My hope is that it will give everyone a chance to say what is important to them.*

### Opening Ceremony

*We will start with an activity.*

#### String exercise

Have a ball of string or twine. The teacher will start and answer a question (see suggestions below). The teacher will then hold on to a piece of the string and toss the ball to a student. The student should then answer the same question and then hold onto a piece of a string and pass the ball to another student, and so on. The ball should not be passed to the person next to the student tossing it.

The end result should look something like a web. After everyone has gone the ball can come back to the teacher. The teacher says: *This web that we made is a reminder that we are all connected as a community. Let this community support us in the coming conversation.*

#### Example questions:

What is something that not many people in this room know about you?

Who is your hero? (This could be a parent, celebrity, fictional character, or another influential person in one's life)

What is your dream job?

What thought or message would you put in a fortune cookie?

**Segue:** *The purpose of today's conversation is to talk about police community relations as we each see them. We may be sharing things that are personal to us, or we may disagree on how we each see things, and it's really important to set guidelines that allow us to feel safe and share openly.*

### **Guidelines/Values**

*We will set some guidelines for the group and how we will interact with each other. For today, we can use these guidelines. If there is anything else you would like add either today or in the future we can do that.*

Have these written up somewhere with space underneath to write more if people want to add.

- One mic.
  - Introduce talking piece. *Whoever is holding the talking piece (TP) has the floor. Everyone else is invited to listen. Everyone will have a turn. You may also pass with the talking piece if you are not ready to speak. There will be times where we won't use the talking piece as well, but for now let's practice.*
  - Pass TP for consensus.
- Everyone is respected. No name-calling or making fun of each other.
  - Pass TP for consensus.
- Confidentiality. What happens in circle stays in circle.
  - *Exception. If anyone is in danger that's something I can't keep secret. If I am going to tell someone else, will talk about it with you first.*
  - Pass TP for consensus.

*Do these work for everyone? Is there anything else anyone would like to add?*

- Pass TP around. Add to piece of paper with guidelines on it.
- *These will be our guidelines for now. If anyone else wants to add or take away anything we can do so. We can also create a larger list and hang them up somewhere in the room.*

### **Check-In**

*Let's get a general sense of the feeling in the room.*

You can ask one or all of these questions.

- How are you feeling about having this conversation today?
- In 2 words, how would you describe police-community relations in your neighborhood?
- Have you ever had an interaction with a police officer?
- Is anyone in your family or anyone you know a police officer?

## Discussion Round

Use these questions as a guide for your discussion. Do not get stuck on a specific question. Allow the students to gravitate toward the topics they find most important. The talking piece can be passed around a few times for each question to get responses to what other students say.

**1. If students participated in the Digital Chats or watched them, here are some reflecting questions:**

- a) Were there any points raised in the chats that you felt strongly about (positively or negatively)? Share your opinion about the discussion you heard.
- b) There's been a strong reaction in communities and the press to how police responded to Eric Garner in Staten Island and other police incidents. Why do you think this is happening in New York City?

**2. Following are the questions that were asked in the Digital Chat:**

- a) In your opinion what are the responsibilities of a police force?
- b) If you were a police officer, what would be some challenges of the job?
- c) What would be some of the best parts?
- d) Can you share a story about a time you've interacted with an officer? This could be good, bad, or neutral.
- e) Has your view of the police changed over time? If so, what key events influenced this change (could be personal or in the news)? How has your view changed and why?
- f) How do you feel about police-community relations in your own neighborhood? How do you think police-community relations in your neighborhood compare to other neighborhoods? Why do you think things are the way they are?
- g) If you walked through your neighborhood and the police were doing their job exactly as you wish, what would your neighborhood look like and how would it be different from the way it is now?
- h) What do you think individual officers could do to improve your relationship with them?
- i) What are of 3 things you can personally do to improve police-community relations? It doesn't matter if it's a big action or a small action. Even a smile.
- j) Are there any laws or policies that should be changed?
- k) What kind of training do you think police officers should have?
- l) How can we assess if police officers are doing a good job?
- m) How should police officers be rewarded or punished?

## Check Out

*It is time to wrap up. I want to end by checking in about how everyone is doing after the conversation we just had.*

- Share three words about how you felt about how you are feeling about today's conversation.

### **Closing Ceremony**

*Thank you all for participating and being open, honest, and respectful you're your thoughts and opinions. Conversations like these make a big difference in moving our society forward in a better way. Circles always end with a closing ceremony. And to wrap things up today I am going to read a quote.*

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

- Martin Luther King Jr.

Feel free to choose any quote, song, poem, or activity that works for you!

***Thank students again.***

# TALKING CIRCLE WORKSHEET

## Facilitator Guide

### Pre-Circle Planning

**What are the goals of the circle?** (Ex: build trust, discuss recent events, celebrate achievements, address classroom issue, does anything from last circle need follow up etc.)

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**Circle introduction:** (Does this circle need special introduction? If so, what is it and how will you convey that to participants? What **Talking Piece** will you use?)

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**Opening Ceremony:** (How will you open the circle? Ex: poem, quote, music, activity, etc?)

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**Guidelines/Values:** (Are guidelines already established and agreed upon? If no, do any additional guidelines need to be introduced? Are there any additional questions that would be helpful to ask in this section?)

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**Check-In:** (What check in question will you ask?)

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**Discussion Rounds:** (What topics do you want to discuss? What questions will you ask? Are you starting with lower risk questions and building to higher risk? How do the questions relate back to the goals for the circle? What challenges do you expect to come up and how will you handle them?)

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**Check-Out:** (What question do you want to use to bring closure or wrap up the circle? How will you handle unfinished topics that are still present in the room?)

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**Closing Ceremony:** (How will you close the circle? Ex: quote, meditation, story, activity, etc.)

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**Materials:** (What materials will I need? Ex: Talking piece, center piece, readings, markers, paper plates for values, etc.)

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# ACTIVITY: THE SIX-WORD STORY

**Have students watch the 8-minute video:**

“What’s the State of Police-Community Relations in 2015?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEIDdvFIKlg>

In the wake of police-involved shootings in Ferguson and Cleveland, the death of Eric Garner in New York, and the subsequent protests that followed those events, NewsHour Weekend examines the state of relations between the police and communities of color in 2015 in interviews with L. Joy Williams, President Brooklyn NAACP, and Julian Harper, retired police lieutenant and member of “100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care.”

After watching the video, discuss the following questions with the class:

1. How do you feel about the opinions expressed by Ms. Williams and Mr. Harper?
2. Do you agree with their opinions? If not, how do you differ?
3. Do you think they are knowledgeable about police-community relations, and explain why or why not?

Now, you are going to take a few minutes to do something creative. <sup>1</sup> Have you ever heard of something called the “Six-Word Memoir” or “Six-Word Story?”

If not, don’t worry. It’s a fun way to simply and concisely express yourself.

The writer Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in six words. He came up with:

“For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

Later, Smith Magazine challenged its readers to submit a six-word memoir. They got thousands of submissions. Here are some examples:

- I like big butts, can’t lie. [submitted by a teenager]
- Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends. [submitted by a grandmother with cancer]
- I still make coffee for two. [submitted by an elderly widower, Zak Nelson]
- She said she was negative. Damn. [by Ryan McRae]
- Joined Army. Came out. Got booted. [by Johan Baumeister]
- Mom died, Dad screwed us over. [by Lesley Kysely]
- Fourteen years old, story still untold [by David Gidwani]
- I like girls. Girls like boys. [Andrea Dela Cruz]

So, your challenge is to write a 6 word story about how you feel about the police, or an experience you’ve had with the police, or how you feel after watching the young man’s story about his experience with the police. You can choose anything you want. Here’s two to get you started.

- Walked outside. Did nothing. Cop Harassed. [by Mariame]
- Cops said my bruises would fade. [by Mariame]

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<sup>1</sup> Mariame Kaba, Project NIA (2013) – [www.project-nia.org](http://www.project-nia.org)

# LIST OF ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

## **Creative Outlets:**

Create one of the following that describes your feelings or an event that happened around the topic of police-community relations.

- Poem
- Song
- Work of art
- Comic strip
- Dance/performance
- A short video meant to showcase one idea you have for how to make things better.

## **Writing Activities:**

- The NYPD's motto is CPR which stands for Courtesy, Professionalism, Respect. The unofficial motto of officers around the country is to "protect and serve." If you could design a new motto for the NYPD, what would it be and why?
- If you could build a short lesson plan (20-60 minutes) for either officers or policy makers, what would you teach them and how?
- If you could write a one-page job description for the NYPD, what would it look like?

## **Action Steps:**

- Ask three other people their thoughts on community relations and how they would improve them. If they say something you disagree with, just listen first. Then repeat back what they said to you to make sure you heard them correctly. With an open mind, ask questions about why they feel the way they do. "Why" is one of the most important questions to ask when trying to figure out how to improve a situation. Together, try to figure out one or two ways that you agree upon about how to make things better. Tell others and continue the conversation.
- Think of three things you can *personally* do to improve police-community relations. **Do them.** It doesn't matter if it's a big action or a small action. It could be as simple as a smile.
- Find out who your local, state, or national representatives are and write to them about the changes you want to see.