

# How it squares

What is circle time, how does it support children's communication development, and why are some settings turning their backs on it, asks **Caroline Vollans**



**M**any young children love the times when they come together in a group. For example, my colleague's daughter Tania loves circle time at her nursery. They have fun singing songs and learning rhymes. It came as something of a shock to Tania – and her mother – when the nursery decided to end its daily circle time.

Could circle time, once popularised for developing children's speaking and listening, be going out of fashion?

Before we consider this question, we need to be clear about what we mean by circle time.

### EFFECTIVE CIRCLE TIMES

The term was coined by Jenny Mosley and relates to a carefully thought-out and specific approach to group times. Mosley calls this 'Quality Circle Time'. It has a clear set of protocols and rules:

- Speaking one at a time.
- Looking at the person they are speaking to.
- The children raise their hands before speaking, though this can be flexible. For example, when the children are involved in a session using puppets or make-believe, they can speak whenever they want, as long as it is one at a time.

I spoke to Jenny about the premises of her approach. She says, 'In Quality Circle Time, we advocate the explicit use of The Five Skills: Thinking, Looking, Listening, Speaking and Concentrating. These are best taught through a programme of focused games with activities for each skill.'

For Jenny, it is not something to be avoided in the EYFS; quite the reverse. 'Skilled practitioners weave in puppets, speaking rounds and simple drama ideas. The circle can offer a magic space where children learn they have the power to solve problems and change outcomes.'

### Circle time often involves games and activities to engage the whole group

Jenny adds, 'Shy children can speak to puppets before the Circle Time, so they know what's going to happen – and often whisper what they want to say to the puppet.'

Jenny and her team have produced information, lesson plans and training on how an effective Circle Time may be achieved.

She summarises, 'Vibrant Circle Times offer a vital forum to support young children's language and communication. When run by motivated and trained practitioners, the children are stimulated to interact and engage.'

### A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO CIRCLE TIME

Circle songs and games are widely used to support children's language development. Singing and movement games are a lot of fun with lots of interactions.

Tracey Sparks is the manager of St James Preschool in the London Borough of Haringey. She advocates this approach to circle time. 'We like to gather the

children together twice a day – when they arrive and before they go home.

‘The whole group sits together, and we sing songs and say rhymes, sometimes with instruments and actions. Alice, from the church, comes along one day a week and does a Bible story and sings a worship song with the children. Through repetition and becoming familiar with the songs and rhymes, the children get to know the words. Over time they request what is sung.’

Some children, usually the youngest, can be reluctant to join the group. Tracey is clear that they don’t have to. ‘Some will just watch from the sidelines until they are ready to join in. No pressure at all is put onto them. Nearly all the children will eventually join the group. It’s a fun and enjoyable time. I think the younger children just need time to get used to what happens and gain confidence.’

In addition, St James’s uses smaller groups for speaking and listening intervention. Anna Markou, the SENCO, says, ‘My main focus is to get children interested in something. If they are curious, they are more likely to want to comment and ask questions.’

Anna uses a ‘Talk Box’, usually with four children, but up to six. She shows the children a range of scenic cards, such as of the beach or the planets. The children look closely and talk about what they see. They make up stories using the scene, adding characters along the way. ‘It is an ideal time for listening and picking up new words. The more confident children model

words which can then be repeated in the discussion. It’s highly interactive. The children’s imaginations are roused, and this evolves into lots of speaking and listening to each other. Children’s imaginations can be very free, and they just need help finding the words to express it.’

## SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Dr Sandra Mathers is senior researcher and lecturer at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. She questions the usefulness of the term ‘circle time’. ‘It tends to bring with it certain ideas and ways of doing things. For example, singing a song or talking about the weather. This minimises the potential importance for oral language and narrows the scope of what might be done if it is just thought of as a “routine”.’

Sandra considers small group language activities as the optimal way to encourage the development of children’s communication.

Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and trainer, thinks that quality circle time is on the wane. ‘It’s not yet dead yet, but I think it is less popular.’ Penny objects to this approach to circle time in the EYFS, considering it an artificial and unnecessary way of trying to get children to speak and listen.

‘When children are two or three, language is very much in development. Circle time is structured around turn-taking and only being able to speak when you’re holding the object. This is problematic.’

**When run by motivated and trained practitioners, the children are stimulated to interact and engage**

She continues, ‘If young children are engaging and actively listening, they will want to comment there and then – it’s how conversation works. As adults, we don’t engage in conversation by strict turn-taking.’

Penny thinks there are more reliable, non-artificial ways that children engage in conversation. ‘Small, non-pressured situations are better for children who need further support with communication. A small adult-led group having a snack can promote a lot of discussion. So can reading a book, or going to the bathroom.’ For Penny, it is these simple and natural contexts for conversation that need emphasising in the EYFS.

## MIXED VIEWS

While the term ‘circle time’ is used quite loosely in the early years, it is important to remember that it is, in fact, a very specific approach developed by Jenny Mosley. While her approach to circle time remains influential, there are suggestions that the protocols and rules are too formal and rigid for young children in the early years. On the other hand, its advocates remain convinced that it is an effective way to develop children’s speaking, listening and attention.

More widely, researchers and practitioners are considering if the most powerful way to help children develop their language skills may be in regular, small-group sessions. These can usefully supplement those times when the whole, larger group of children come together to sing or share a story, which children like Tania value so much. ■

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**MORE INFORMATION**

- Jenny Mosley Consultancy, <https://www.circle-time.co.uk>

## case study: Quality Circle Time



Clowns Nursery in the London Borough of Barnet use Jenny Mosley’s model. I spoke to the early years lead, Emily Cassidy-Smith.

‘At Clowns Nursery we adopted Jenny Mosley’s model of Quality Circle Time after observing a session in training. We recognised the benefits it would provide for our children. The sessions are set out in a specific manner, allowing the children to learn key skills through repetition. Each session has an exciting theme which never fails to engage all children.’

Emily explains what a session looks like. ‘Every session includes an introduction. This gives all children an opportunity to speak, sharing their ideas and opinions.’

‘The middle section involves a game or activity. This challenges their concentration skills and gives them a purpose to use their speaking and listening skills.’

‘The session then closes with a shared experience, for example a song or story. It always ends on a positive note, allowing the children to feel part of the group and helping them to develop a strong sense of self.’

At Clowns, the team consider Quality Circle Time invaluable for supporting speech and language skills. Emily says, ‘The children develop an ability to listen to one another, look at one another and take turns to speak. Jenny Mosley’s model is tailored brilliantly for this age group. The session plans are easy to follow and cover relevant themes.’

As well as Circle Time, Clowns uses Every Child a Talker (ECAT) for children requiring additional speech and language support.

The setting also works alongside individual children delivering bespoke interventions where required.