

Youth Dialogue Circle Guide

A Step-by-Step Manual for Creating Meaningful Conversations That Lead to Action

Why Start a Dialogue Circle?

For You

- Develop confidence in speaking up about important issues
- Learn to listen deeply and build empathy
- Practice facilitating and organizing skills
- Connect with peers who share your values
- Feel empowered to make a difference in your community

For Your Community

- Bridge divides between different groups of young people
- Generate creative solutions to local challenges
- Build stronger relationships and trust
- Create space for voices that are often unheard
- Develop young leaders who can drive positive change

For Society

- Model healthy dialogue in a polarized world
 - Demonstrate that young people can engage constructively with complex issues
 - Create pathways for youth voice in community decision-making
 - Foster civic engagement and democratic participation
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Getting Started: The 5-Step Launch Process

Step 1: Clarify Your Purpose and Vision (Week 1)

Define Your "Why"

- What issue or question do you want to explore?
- What change do you hope to see in your community?
- Why is this important to you personally?

Examples of Circle Purposes:

-  **School Issues:** "How can we make our school more inclusive and supportive for all students?"
-  **Climate Action:** "What can young people in our town do about climate change?"
-  **Community Relations:** "How can we bridge divides between different groups in our neighborhood?"
-  **Economic Justice:** "How do we address inequality and create opportunities for all young people?"
-  **Housing:** "What solutions exist for young people facing housing insecurity?"
-  **Digital Wellness:** "How do we maintain healthy relationships with technology and social media?"

Create Your Vision Statement Write 1-2 sentences describing what success looks like for your circle.

Example: "Our circle will bring together students from different backgrounds to understand each other's experiences and develop projects that make our school a place where everyone feels they belong."

Step 2: Plan the Logistics (Week 2)

Choose Your Format

- **In-Person:** Better for building trust and connection
- **Virtual:** More accessible for people with transportation/scheduling challenges
- **Hybrid:** Combine both for maximum inclusion

Decide on Frequency and Duration

- **Weekly circles:** 1.5-2 hours for 6-8 weeks
- **Bi-weekly circles:** 2-2.5 hours for 8-10 weeks
- **Monthly intensives:** 3-4 hours once per month for 4-6 months

Find Your Space

- **Schools:** Classrooms, libraries, student centers
- **Community:** Libraries, community centers, faith spaces, parks
- **Homes:** Living rooms (for smaller, informal circles)
- **Online:** Zoom, Google Meet, or other platforms with breakout rooms

Gather Basic Supplies

- Flip chart paper and markers
- Sticky notes
- Name tags
- Timer or phone
- Snacks and drinks
- Talking piece (see below)

Step 3: Recruit Participants (Week 3)

Aim for Diversity Try to include people with different:

- Cultural backgrounds and identities
- Perspectives on the issues you'll discuss
- Levels of experience with activism/community work
- Ages (within your target range)
- Communication styles (talkative and quieter people)

Recruitment Strategies

- **Personal invitation:** Start with friends, then ask them to invite others
- **Social media:** Post in relevant groups and ask people to share
- **Flyers:** In schools, community centers, coffee shops
- **Community organizations:** Partner with existing youth groups
- **Teachers/adults:** Ask trusted adults to help spread the word

Invitation Message Template

Hi! I'm starting a youth dialogue circle to explore [your topic]. We'll meet [frequency]

This is a space for:

- ✨ Honest conversation across difference
- ✨ Learning from each other's experiences
- ✨ Developing solutions we can actually implement
- ✨ Building authentic relationships

No experience necessary - just bring curiosity and willingness to listen!

Interested? Reply with questions or let me know you'd like to join.

Optimal Group Size

- **Small circles:** 6-8 people (more intimate, easier to manage)
- **Large circles:** 10-12 people (more diverse perspectives, requires more skill)

Step 4: Prepare Yourself as Facilitator (Week 4)

Develop Core Facilitation Skills

Deep Listening

- Pay attention to both words and emotions
- Notice when someone seems to have more to say
- Resist the urge to immediately respond or fix
- Ask clarifying questions: "Can you tell me more about that?"

Creating Safety

- Set clear agreements about confidentiality
- Interrupt respectfully when conversations become heated
- Ensure everyone gets heard, not just the loudest voices
- Model vulnerability by sharing your own experiences

Managing Group Dynamics

- Notice who's talking and who isn't
- Gently redirect when conversations go off-topic
- Know how to handle conflict constructively
- Keep track of time while allowing for organic flow

Practice These Phrases

- "Thank you for sharing that. Who else has thoughts on this?"
- "I'm noticing we're getting into debate mode. Let's step back and listen to understand."
- "It seems like there's strong feeling about this. Can we slow down and hear from everyone?"
- "What I'm hearing is... Is that right?"
- "Let's take a breath together."

Prepare for Challenges

- **Someone dominates the conversation:** "Thank you, [name]. Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."
- **Conflict arises:** "I see we have different perspectives here. Let's get curious about those differences."
- **Silence feels uncomfortable:** "Silence is okay. Take time to think."

- **Someone gets emotional:** "Thank you for trusting us with your feelings. Would you like to say more or shall we move on?"

Step 5: Design Your First Session (Week 4)

Session 1 Agenda Template (2 hours)

Opening Circle (20 minutes)

- Welcome and introductions
- Share hopes and concerns for the circle
- Review agreements and guidelines

Relationship Building (30 minutes)

- Pair sharing: "Tell your partner about a time when you felt really heard by someone"
- Report back key insights to the whole group

Topic Introduction (40 minutes)

- Present the issue/question you'll be exploring
- Initial round: "What's your personal connection to this topic?"
- Clarify what you'll explore in future sessions

Action Visioning (20 minutes)

- Small groups: "If this circle is wildly successful, what will be different in our community 6 months from now?"
- Share visions with the whole group

Closing Circle (10 minutes)

- Each person shares one word describing how they're feeling
- Confirm next meeting time and any preparation needed



Creating the Container: Agreements and Guidelines

Essential Circle Agreements

Confidentiality "What's shared here, stays here. Stories and insights can be shared, but not who said what."

Own Your Experience "Speak from 'I' statements rather than generalizing about others or groups."

Listen with Curiosity "Try to understand rather than convince. Ask questions to learn more."

Space for All Voices "Step up if you tend to be quiet, step back if you tend to talk a lot."

Expect and Accept Non-Closure "We won't solve everything today. Some conversations will continue."

Care for Yourself and Others "Take breaks when you need them. Speak up if something doesn't feel right."

Advanced Agreements for Diverse Groups

Honor Different Communication Styles "Some of us process by talking, others by listening. Both are valuable."

Name Impact Over Intent "If something lands wrong, we'll address the impact even if the intent was good."

Cultural Humility "We may not understand everyone's background. We'll ask respectful questions and share our own experiences."

Brave Space, Not Safe Space "We'll take risks to grow together, knowing that growth can be uncomfortable."

Using a Talking Piece

A talking piece is an object that indicates who has the floor to speak. Choose something meaningful:

- 🪨 A stone from your local area
- 🌱 A plant or flower
- 🎨 Something created by a group member
- 🗨️ A meaningful object from different cultures represented

How It Works:

- Only the person holding the talking piece speaks
- Others listen without interrupting
- Speaker can pass it when they're done or ready for responses
- Anyone can request the talking piece by raising their hand

Facilitation Techniques for Deeper Dialogue

Opening and Closing Rituals

Opening Options

- **Moment of silence:** 30 seconds to center and arrive
- **Weather check:** Each person shares how they're feeling using weather metaphors
- **Gratitude round:** Quick sharing of something each person is grateful for
- **Intention setting:** "What do you hope to give and receive today?"

Closing Options

- **Word/phrase check-out:** One word describing how you're leaving
- **Appreciation circle:** Acknowledge something specific you appreciated about the session
- **Commitment round:** Share one thing you'll think about or do before next time
- **Group breath:** Three deep breaths together

Dialogue Formats for Different Purposes

For Building Understanding: Listening Circles

- Pose a question
- Go around the circle with each person sharing (no responses)
- Second round for anyone who wants to add more
- Reflect on themes and insights heard

Example questions:

- "What's a story that shaped how you see this issue?"
- "Describe a time when your opinion changed about something important."

For Exploring Complexity: Fishbowl

- 4-5 people sit in inner circle discussing the topic
- Others observe from outer circle

- Anyone can tap in by touching someone's shoulder
- Creates dynamic conversation with built-in reflection

For Decision-Making: Consensus Building

- Present the decision to be made
- Clarifying questions only (no opinions yet)
- Discussion of options and concerns
- Test for consensus: "Can everyone live with this decision?"
- Address concerns and modify until you reach agreement

For Action Planning: Open Space

- Post big questions on walls around the room
- People move between conversations as interests shift
- Capture key insights on flip charts
- Report back and identify next steps

Handling Difficult Moments

When Someone Shares Something Heavy

- Thank them for their trust
- Ask if they need anything right now
- Check if they want responses or just to be heard
- Don't try to fix or minimize their experience

When Conflict Emerges

- Slow down and breathe
- Acknowledge the tension: "I'm noticing some strong feelings here"
- Ask each person to share their perspective without interruption
- Look for underlying needs or values they share
- Take a break if needed

When Energy Drops

- Notice body language and engagement
- Call for a stretch break or movement
- Change format (small groups, pairs, walking)
- Check in about what's needed

When Someone Says Something Harmful

- Don't ignore it or pretend it didn't happen
- Address impact: "I want to pause here because that comment landed hard for some folks"
- Give space for people to respond
- Return to agreements and ground rules
- Follow up privately with both the speaker and those affected

Creative Activities to Deepen Connection

Storytelling Techniques

Digital Storytelling

- Each person creates a 3-minute video about their connection to the topic

- Share and discuss common themes
- Use phones/tablets - no fancy equipment needed

Timeline Mapping

- Create personal timelines of experiences related to your topic
- Share in pairs, then notice patterns as a group
- Identify turning points and learning moments

Photo Voice

- Take photos representing the issue in your community
- Share photos and stories behind them
- Create an exhibit or social media campaign

Art and Creative Expression

Community Mapping

- Draw a map of your neighborhood/school
- Mark places that feel safe, unsafe, inspiring, challenging
- Discuss patterns and brainstorm improvements

Vision Boards

- Create collages representing your ideal community
- Share and find common elements
- Use as inspiration for action projects

Theater of the Oppressed

- Act out scenarios related to your topic
- Stop and try different approaches
- Practice handling difficult situations

Movement and Embodiment

Walking Dialogues

- Take conversations outside
- Walking side-by-side can ease intensity
- Movement can unlock different insights

Body Votes

- Use physical positioning to show opinions
- Stand on a spectrum from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"
- See the range of perspectives visually

Energy Check-ins

- Use movement to show how you're feeling
- Stretch, dance, or do yoga together
- Pay attention to the group's collective energy

Making It Culturally Responsive and Inclusive

Before You Start

Learn About Your Community

- Research the cultural groups in your area
- Understand historical tensions or conflicts
- Learn about different communication styles and values
- Identify community leaders who might offer guidance

Examine Your Own Identity

- What privileges and challenges do you bring?
- How might your background affect how others see you?
- What do you need to learn to facilitate across difference?
- Who can mentor or support you in this work?

Inclusive Recruitment

Go Where People Are

- Visit existing community groups rather than expecting people to come to you
- Partner with organizations serving different populations
- Ask community leaders to help with outreach
- Offer multiple ways to participate (in-person, virtual, different times)

Address Barriers

- Provide transportation or bus passes
- Offer childcare or make it family-friendly
- Have food that accommodates different dietary needs
- Ensure the space is accessible for people with disabilities
- Offer participation in multiple languages if needed

Adapting Facilitation Style

Honor Different Communication Norms

- Some cultures emphasize listening to elders first
- Eye contact expectations vary across cultures
- Some people process internally before speaking
- Storytelling may be more valued than analytical discussion

Include Multiple Ways of Participating

- Drawing, writing, movement, music
- Small group discussions before large group sharing
- Anonymous question/comment submission
- Time for reflection and silence

Acknowledge Power Dynamics

- Name differences in privilege and access
- Address how racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression affect the issues you're discussing
- Create space for people to share their experiences of marginalization
- Don't expect people from marginalized groups to educate others

Sample Cultural Adaptations

Indigenous-Informed Circles

- Begin with land acknowledgment
- Include talking circles with passing of talking piece

- Honor seven-generation thinking
- Connect issues to relationship with land

Immigrant/Refugee Communities

- Start with relationship building and trust development
- Address language barriers with interpretation
- Understand experiences of displacement and trauma
- Connect to transnational perspectives

LGBTQ+ Focused Circles

- Use preferred pronouns and inclusive language
- Address safety and confidentiality concerns
- Include discussion of identity and coming out experiences
- Connect to broader justice movements

From Dialogue to Action: Making Change Happen

Types of Action Projects

Advocacy and Policy

- Present findings to school board or city council
- Organize petition campaigns or letter-writing
- Meet with elected officials
- Participate in public hearings

Direct Service

- Organize volunteer projects addressing immediate needs
- Create mutual aid networks
- Start tutoring or mentorship programs
- Coordinate community cleanups or beautification

Education and Awareness

- Create social media campaigns
- Organize forums or teach-ins
- Write articles for school or local newspapers
- Develop workshops for peers

Community Building

- Host cultural exchange events
- Start support groups or affinity spaces
- Organize festivals or celebrations
- Create safe spaces for marginalized groups

Creative Expression

- Organize art exhibitions or performances
- Create documentaries or podcasts
- Write and perform spoken word or music
- Design murals or public art installations

Action Planning Process

Step 1: Identify Root Causes

- What are the deeper issues behind the problems you've discussed?
- Which causes are you most passionate about addressing?
- Where do you have the most potential for impact?

Step 2: Map Your Assets

- What skills, connections, and resources does your group have?
- What do you need to learn or who do you need to partner with?
- How much time can people realistically commit?

Step 3: Choose Your Strategy

- What type of change are you seeking (individual, institutional, cultural)?
- Who has the power to make the changes you want to see?
- How can you influence them most effectively?

Step 4: Plan Specific Actions

- Break your strategy into concrete, doable steps
- Assign roles and responsibilities
- Set deadlines and check-in points
- Plan for how you'll measure success

Step 5: Prepare for Challenges

- What resistance might you face?
- How will you sustain momentum when things get difficult?
- What support do you need from adults or other allies?
- How will you take care of yourselves and each other?

Action Project Templates

Template 1: School Policy Change

- **Issue:** Lack of mental health support
- **Goal:** Get school to hire additional counselors
- **Actions:** Student survey, presentation to administration, petition campaign, school board presentation
- **Timeline:** 3 months
- **Resources needed:** Survey platform, presentation materials, adult allies

Template 2: Community Awareness Campaign

- **Issue:** Environmental justice in your neighborhood
- **Goal:** Educate community about environmental health risks
- **Actions:** Research, create educational materials, host community forum, social media campaign
- **Timeline:** 2 months
- **Resources needed:** Research access, design skills, venue for forum

Template 3: Direct Service Project

- **Issue:** Food insecurity among students
- **Goal:** Ensure all students have access to meals
- **Actions:** Survey needs, organize food drive, create ongoing food pantry, advocate for free lunch programs
- **Timeline:** Ongoing with monthly check-ins

- **Resources needed:** Storage space, relationships with food sources, volunteers



Keeping Track: Evaluation and Reflection

Regular Check-ins

Weekly Pulse Checks

- How are you feeling about the circle?
- What's working well?
- What would you like to see more/less of?
- How are the group agreements working?

Mid-Point Evaluation (3-4 sessions in)

- Are we meeting the goals we set?
- How are group dynamics?
- Do we need to adjust our approach?
- What have been the most valuable moments?

Final Reflection

- What did you learn about the issues?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- How did your thinking change?
- What action commitments are you making?

Measuring Impact

Individual Level

- Knowledge gained about the issues
- Skills developed (listening, speaking, organizing)
- Confidence in speaking up
- Connections formed with other participants
- Commitment to continued action

Group Level

- Quality of dialogue and listening
- Ability to handle conflict constructively
- Diversity of perspectives included
- Concrete actions planned or implemented
- Relationships built across difference

Community Level

- Awareness raised about the issues
- Policy or institutional changes influenced
- New partnerships or collaborations formed
- Model created for other youth groups
- Contribution to broader social movements

Documentation Strategies

Keep a Circle Journal

- Key insights from each session

- Quotes that capture important moments
- Observations about group development
- Ideas for future circles

Photo Documentation

- Action projects and events (with permission)
- Flip chart notes and visual maps
- Group photos showing energy and connection
- Before/after shots of community changes

Story Collection

- Ask participants to write or record their experiences
- Document how their thinking has changed
- Capture moments of breakthrough or connection
- Share stories with permission to inspire others

Sustaining and Growing Your Work

Avoiding Burnout

Pace Yourself

- Don't try to solve everything at once
- Celebrate small wins and progress
- Take breaks between intensive sessions
- Rotate leadership responsibilities

Build Your Support Network

- Find adult mentors who can offer guidance
- Connect with other youth organizers
- Join broader movements for mutual support
- Take care of your physical and mental health

Remember Your Why

- Revisit your original motivations regularly
- Notice the positive changes you're creating
- Stay connected to the people most affected by the issues
- Focus on the learning and growth, not just outcomes

Growing Your Impact

Train New Facilitators

- Teach others the skills you've learned
- Create a "training of trainers" model
- Document your processes for others to replicate
- Build a network of youth dialogue circles

Partner with Organizations

- Connect with existing nonprofits and community groups
- Offer your services for their events and campaigns
- Learn from experienced organizers and activists

- Contribute your fresh perspectives to their work

Influence Systems

- Share your methods with schools and youth organizations
- Present at conferences or community events
- Write articles about your experiences
- Advocate for youth voice in community decision-making

Continuous Learning

Study Social Movements

- Learn from successful youth movements of the past
- Understand how social change happens
- Study what works and what doesn't
- Connect your local work to broader movements

Develop Your Skills

- Take workshops on facilitation, organizing, and communication
- Practice conflict resolution and mediation
- Learn about the specific issues you're working on
- Develop your emotional intelligence and self-awareness

Stay Curious and Humble

- Ask for feedback regularly
- Admit when you make mistakes
- Be willing to change your approach
- Listen to criticism and learn from it

Getting Support and Finding Resources

Finding Adult Allies

Look for Adults Who

- Respect youth voice and leadership
- Have experience with facilitation or organizing
- Share your values and commitments
- Can provide resources or connections
- Are willing to step back and let you lead

Potential Adult Allies

- Teachers who care about social justice
- Community organizers and activists
- Social workers and counselors
- Religious or spiritual leaders
- Parents of circle participants
- Local politicians who support youth engagement

How to Approach Adults

- Be clear about what support you need
- Emphasize that you want partnership, not takeover

- Show that you've thought through your plans
- Ask for specific help rather than general support
- Be prepared to educate them about your methods

Funding Your Work

Low-Cost Strategies

- Meet in free community spaces
- Ask participants to bring snacks to share
- Use free online tools for coordination
- Partner with organizations that have resources
- Apply for small grants from local foundations

Potential Funding Sources

- School clubs budgets
- Youth development organizations
- Community foundations
- Faith communities
- Crowdfunding campaigns
- Local businesses that support youth

Budget Template for Youth Dialogue Circle

- Space rental (if needed): \$0-200
- Food and refreshments: \$50-150
- Materials (flip charts, markers, etc.): \$25-75
- Transportation support: \$0-100
- Total for 8-session series: \$75-525

Educational Resources

Books on Dialogue and Facilitation

- "Technology of Participation" by ICA
- "Dialogue: The Art of Inquiry and Conversation" by William Isaacs
- "Getting to Yes" by Roger Fisher and William Ury
- "Nonviolent Communication" by Marshall Rosenberg

Online Resources

- National Issues Forums: Discussion guides on current topics
- Study Circles Resource Center: Facilitation training materials
- Everyday Democracy: Tools for community dialogue
- Training for Change: Workshop activities and exercises

Organizations to Connect With

- National Conference for Community and Justice
- YouthBuild USA
- Campus Compact
- Points of Light Foundation
- Local YWCA/YMCA chapters

Ready-to-Use Templates

Recruitment Flyer Template

☀️ YOUTH DIALOGUE CIRCLE ☀️
Exploring [Your Topic]

Tired of talking AT each other instead of WITH each other?
Ready to turn conversation into action?

Join us for [Number] sessions of real talk about [Issue]

We'll explore questions like:

- [Question 1]
- [Question 2]
- [Question 3]

When: [Day and Time]

Where: [Location]

Who: Youth ages [Age Range]

No experience necessary - just bring curiosity and willingness to listen!

Contact [Your Name]: [Your Contact Info]

[Include logos of any partnering organizations]

First Session Welcome Script

"Welcome everyone! I'm [Your Name] and I'm excited to start this dialogue circle with

Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that we're gathering on the traditional land of

The purpose of our circle is [Your Purpose Statement]. Over the next [Number] sessions

This isn't a debate where we try to convince each other we're right. It's a space to

Let's start by going around and sharing:

- Your name
- One hope you have for our time together
- One concern or nervousness you might have

I'll start..."

Session Planning Template

SESSION [Number]: [Topic/Focus]

Preparation Needed:

- Materials:
- Room setup:
- Background reading (optional):

Opening (10 minutes)

- Welcome and check-in
- Recap of last session
- Preview of today

Main Activity 1 (30 minutes)

- Purpose:
- Instructions:
- Discussion questions:

Break (10 minutes)**Main Activity 2 (30 minutes)**

- Purpose:
- Instructions:
- Discussion questions:

Action Planning (15 minutes)

- What ideas are emerging for action?
- What do we need to learn more about?
- Who might we need to talk to?

Closing (10 minutes)

- Reflection on today
- Commitments for next time
- Appreciation circle

Celebrating Success

Remember that success in dialogue circles isn't just about the big policy changes or media attention you might get. Success also looks like:

- **A quiet person** finding their voice and speaking up for the first time
- **Two people** who disagreed strongly at the beginning becoming friends
- **Someone** changing their mind about an important issue
- **The group** learning to handle conflict with respect and care
- **Participants** taking initiative to organize their own projects
- **Community members** saying they feel more heard and valued
- **You** developing skills and confidence you didn't know you had

Every authentic conversation, every moment of real listening, every bridge built across difference is a victory worth celebrating.

Your work matters. Your voice matters. The world needs the unique combination of wisdom, energy, and hope that young people bring to the challenges we face together.

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can. And remember - you don't have to be perfect to make a difference.

The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.

This guide is part of the Global Governance Framework project. All materials are freely available under Creative Commons licensing. Share, adapt, and improve on these ideas to fit your community's needs.

Questions? Need support? Email us at globalgovernanceframework@gmail.com or connect with other youth organizers in our online community.

Want more resources? Check out our Youth Leadership Toolkit and other materials at globalgovernanceframework.org/youth