

CIRCLE BELONGS TO THE CHILDREN

A Guide to Discussion, Listening, and Group Conversation for Sabbath School Leaders

“Your job in circle time is not to teach. It is to make it safe enough for children to teach each other.”

1 Why Children Need to Do Most of the Talking

Circle time is not a mini-lesson. It is not a chance to reinforce the story one more time through questions that have already-decided answers. It is something far more powerful: a protected space where children discover that their feelings, questions, and experiences matter — and that God is interested in all of them.

When adults dominate the conversation — even with kind, wise, well-meaning words — children learn to wait for the right answer rather than find their own voice. But when children do most of the talking, something else happens: they begin to connect faith to their real lives, not just to Bible stories.

“Children learn to think by talking, not by listening. When we give them space to put their experience into words, we give them the tools to make meaning.”

— Vivian Gussin Paley, educator

The Leader's Role: Guide, Not Teacher

In a child-centered circle, your role shifts from teacher to guide. That distinction matters enormously.

A Teacher in Circle Time ...	A Guide in Circle Time ...
Fills silence with explanation	Lets silence do its work
Corrects wrong answers	Responds with curiosity
Tells children what to think	Asks what children notice
Summarizes what the lesson meant	Invites children to say what it meant to them
Talks for 60–70% of the time	Talks for 20–30% of the time



A Practical Target

For every minute you speak in circle time, aim for three minutes of children speaking. If you find yourself talking more than that, pause, ask a question, and hand it back.

2 Setting Up a Circle That Invites Sharing

Before a single word is spoken, the environment you create tells children whether this is a safe place to be honest. Set the circle up with intention.

Physical Setup

- Sit in a true circle — everyone at the same level, including you. No chairs pulled back, no leader at the head.
- Sit on the floor with younger children. At a table with older ones. Side-by-side, not across from.
- Use a talking object — a small smooth stone, a soft ball, a simple wooden figure. Whoever holds it speaks; everyone else listens.
- Keep the group small if possible. Six to ten children is ideal. Larger groups can be split.
- Minimize distractions: put away crafts and materials, reduce visual clutter, face away from doors if possible.

Restate Expectations Every Single Week

Safety is built through consistency. Children need to hear the same expectations every time — not because they forgot, but because repetition creates a culture.

Say This at the Start of Every Circle

“Before we begin, let's remember our circle agreements. We share our own feelings — never something unkind about someone else or a name that might embarrass anyone. No one is ever forced to share — passing is always okay. When someone is talking, everyone else listens. If you agree with something someone shares, you can show it with our 'Me Too' signal — [demonstrate]. And everything shared here stays here.”

The “Me Too” Signal

Teach children a quiet, nonverbal way to respond to each other's sharing — a small hand wave near the chest, a gentle tap on their own heart, or a soft thumbs-up. This allows children to feel heard and connected without interrupting the speaker, and it tells the child sharing: you are not alone in this.

3 Discussion Questions That Open Children Up

The best discussion questions do not have right answers. They invite children to reflect on their own experience, name their own feelings, and connect the story to their real lives. Avoid questions that can be answered with a single word. Aim for questions that begin with “What,” “When,” “How,” or “Tell me about a time...”

Questions That Connect to Feelings

- Has there ever been a time when you felt really left out? What was that like?
- When something feels really unfair, what do you do with that feeling?
- What is something that makes you feel brave? What makes you feel afraid?
- Have you ever felt two feelings at the same time — like happy and nervous together? Tell us about it.
- When you are really upset, who do you want to be with? What do they do that helps?
- Has there ever been a moment when you felt really proud of yourself? What happened?

Questions That Connect the Story to Life

- If you were in this story, which character do you think you would be most like? Why?
- Has something like this ever happened to you or someone you know?
- What do you think was the hardest choice in this story? Have you ever had to make a choice like that?
- What would you have done differently if you were there?
- What is one thing from this story that you want to remember this week?
- Is there anything in this story that confused you or that you have a question about?

Questions About God's Character

- What does this story tell us about what God is like?
- Do you think God understood how [character] was feeling? Why?
- Was there a moment in this story where you saw God being kind? Brave? Patient?
- Is there anything about God in this story that surprised you?
- What is one thing you want to tell God about this story?
- Based on what we talked about today, whose team does it make you want to be on? Why?

Questions That Go Deeper

- What is something you believe about God that you think not everyone knows?
- Is there something you have been wondering about God but have not known how to ask?
- When has God felt close to you? When has He felt far away?
- If God were sitting right here in our circle, what do you think He would say to us today?
- What is one thing you want to be different in your life because of what we talked about today?

 Remember

Ask one question, then wait. Do not stack questions. Do not rephrase immediately. Give children 10–15 seconds of quiet — that space is where thinking happens. Resist the urge to fill it.

4 How to Listen — And Why It Changes Everything

Children will share as deeply as they feel heard. When you listen with your full body and genuine attention, you communicate something more powerful than any lesson: you are worth listening to. That message — received repeatedly, in a circle of peers — becomes part of how a child understands their own worth.

What Listening Looks Like for Leaders

- Stop all movement when a child speaks. Put down anything in your hands.
- Make soft, steady eye contact — not staring, but present.
- Nod, make small sounds of acknowledgment: “mm-hmm,” “yeah,” “I hear you.”
- Lean in slightly. Let your body say: I am receiving what you are giving.
- Do not look at other children while someone is speaking. Give the speaker your full face.
- When they finish, pause one or two seconds before responding. Let their words land.

Responding Without Redirecting

The most common mistake leaders make is immediately evaluating or expanding on what a child says — which unintentionally shifts the focus back to the leader. Instead, try responses that stay with the child:

Redirects Away from the Child ...	Stays with the Child ...
“That's right! And what the Bible says is...”	“That's really interesting. What made you think of that?”
“Good answer! The point of the story is...”	“I love that. Did anyone else have a similar feeling?”
“Yes, and I think what God wants us to know is...”	“Say more about that. I want to understand what you mean.”
“That's not quite right, but...”	“Hmm. I'm curious about that. What makes you think so?”
Immediately calling on the next child	Letting the moment breathe, then reflecting back what you heard

When a Child Says “I Don't Know”

Never push past a genuine “I don't know” — but do not always accept it at face value either. Sometimes it means they need a different entry point.

- Shrink the question: “What's one word that comes to mind when you think about this story?”
- Offer choices: “Was the character more scared, angry, or relieved? Which one feels closest?”
- Go first yourself: Share your own brief, honest response — then invite them again.

- Accept it gracefully: “That's okay. If something comes to you, I want to hear it.” Move on without pressure.

 The 10-Second Pause

After asking a question, count silently to 10 before rephrasing or moving on. Most leaders wait only 2–3 seconds. Children — especially thoughtful ones — need more time. That silence is not empty. It is where the real answers are forming.

5 Teaching Children to Listen and Respond to Each Other

A true sharing circle is not just children taking turns talking to a leader. It is children learning to hold space for each other — to genuinely receive what a peer shares and respond with kindness and curiosity. This is one of the most valuable social and spiritual skills you can teach.

Model It First — Every Time

Children learn to listen by watching you listen. When you give a child your full, unhurried attention — leaning in, making eye contact, responding thoughtfully — you are not just being kind. You are demonstrating a skill they will internalize and eventually imitate.



Name What You Are Doing

Occasionally narrate your listening out loud so children can see it: “Wait — I want to make sure I really heard what Mia said. She said she felt nervous AND excited. Those two feelings together are really interesting.” This makes the invisible visible.

Teach the Skills Explicitly

Do not assume children know how to listen to each other. Teach it directly, in simple language, and reinforce it consistently:

1. Eyes on the speaker. “When someone is talking, we look at them — not at the floor, not at our hands. We give them our eyes.”
2. Mouths closed, hearts open. “While someone is talking, our job is to receive what they are saying — not to think of what we want to say next.”
3. The 'Me Too' signal. “If something someone shares feels true for you too, you can show it quietly, without words. It tells them: you are not alone.”
4. Respond with kindness, not advice. “When someone shares something hard, we do not try to fix it or tell them what to do. We just say: 'That sounds really hard' or 'I'm glad you told us.'”
5. We never laugh at someone's feelings. “There are no wrong feelings in this circle. If someone shares something that surprises us, we stay kind.”

Teach Children to Respond to Each Other

Once children are comfortable sharing, begin inviting them to respond to each other — not just to you. This is where the circle comes alive.

- After a child shares, ask the group: “Did anyone have a similar feeling? Did anything [name] said connect with your own experience?”
- Redirect questions to the group: “That's a great question. Does anyone else want to respond to what [name] shared?”

- Teach response starters explicitly. Model and post phrases like: “I felt that way too when...,” “What you said made me think of...,” “I hadn’t thought of it that way — can you tell me more?”
- Celebrate peer responses: “I love that you responded to your friend, not just to me. That’s what a real circle does.”

Response Starters to Post or Teach

- “I felt that way too when ...”
- “What you said made me think about ...”
- “I never thought about it that way. Can you say more?”
- “That sounds really hard. I’m glad you shared it.”
- “I have a question about what you said — can I ask it?”
- “Your idea is different from mine, and I’m curious why you think that.”

6 Real Scenarios: What to Say Instead

These common moments happen in almost every circle. Here is how to redirect gracefully without shutting anyone down.

A child gives a “right” answer but shuts the conversation down

Often said: *"That's exactly right! Jesus wants us to love each other. Okay, what's next..."*

Try instead: "Yes — and I'm curious what makes that feel true to you. Has there been a time you experienced that?"

An adult in the room starts giving a long explanation

Often said: *"[Adult gives a teaching moment in response to a child's question]"*

Try instead: "Thank you — I love that thought. I want to hear what the kids think about that too. Who has a response?"

A child shares something very heavy or personal

Often said: *"Oh, wow. Well, let's remember that God is always with us... [moves on quickly]"*

Try instead: "Thank you for trusting us with that. That took courage. [Pause.] Does anyone want to respond to what [name] shared?"

The same child dominates every week

Often said: *"Great, [name]! Anyone else? [waits briefly, calls on same child again]"*

Try instead: "I love your ideas, [name]. I'm going to give some others a turn — and I'll come back to you."

A child says something theologically off-track

Often said: *"Hmm, well actually... what the Bible says is..."*

Try instead: "That's an interesting thought. Tell me what makes you think that. [After they share:] I wonder what others think?"

The group goes quiet and no one responds to a question

Often said: *"Okay, well, what I think the lesson is teaching us is..."*

Try instead: "That's okay — big questions need quiet time. I'll give us 10 seconds to just think. [Counts silently. Tries again.]"

When Children Feel Heard, They Begin to Believe They Matter.

And when they believe they matter, they begin to believe that God — who made them and knows them — sees them too.

That is the whole point of the circle.