



Transitions & Closures

In Girls Circle and The Council for Boys and Young Men



School years end; seasons change; students transition from elementary school to middle to high school and beyond; children are moved in and out of institutions or foster homes; programs and groups come to an end. While some of these changes are welcome and expected, other are not. Most are outside of the control of children and youth. Individuals vary in their responses to transitions, depending on previous experiences, temperament, current stressors, and their own mental health. Changes can trigger anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in youth who have had losses, inconsistent or tenuous relationships with adults in their lives, abandonment, or multiple moves. Some youth will actively disengage in order to cope with the stress of anticipated losses. Even desired and expected changes can heighten distraction and anxiety in most youth.

How can our transition practices be trauma-responsive and relational?

How can we create safety and consistency in groups in high transition settings?

How can we promote resiliency and maximize healthy relationship development in youth even during transitions and closures?

General Recommendations with Transitions & Closures:

- **Talk about changes directly with your group. As soon as you know they are coming, state what's ahead.** If a group will end in five more sessions, state the number of sessions remaining at *each* meeting, not waiting for the last or second to last session to address the change. The more predictable, the better for everyone.
- **Normalize different ways kids feel or deal with transitions.** You might give a few examples, such as “Sometimes people get excited, some feel stressed, some have sadness or worry about leaving people they like and care about...there is no wrong or right way to feel.”
- **Invite open discussions about the changes, both immediate and anticipated,** and ask the participants what they like and dislike about the coming changes, or how they feel about what's happening. Suggest they choose three colors that represent their feelings and describe them. Ask them what their group should know about them in order to fully support each other. Be sure to invite their suggestions for supporting one another.

- **Affirm members** for the creative and supportive ways they can assist each other in adjusting to the changes.
- **Use imagery, grounding exercises, physical relaxation, music, expressive arts, and games:** for anxiety, distraction, disengagement, or restlessness, use these kinds of activities to provide girls and boys with experiences to develop their internal resources while staying connected. These activities **invite a focus on the present**, which is stress-relieving and restorative.

For example:

- **Imagery**

You can incorporate phrases and images from nature and everyday life that relate to change, and normalize the fact of change, i.e., the sun rises and sets each day; tides roll in and back out; whales migrate north then south; babies grow bigger; seeds grown into stalks, then into corn; stars burn out while others are born; and so on. Ask group members to imagine a familiar place that gives them a feeling of safety and calmness. Take 20 seconds and ask them to bring that place to mind as fully as possible – scent, feel, sights, sounds. Finally, remind the group that this image is inside of them and they can bring it to mind whenever they want to feel safe and relaxed.

- **Grounding exercises and muscle relaxation**

When focusing on specific aspects of their bodies, girls and boys are learning to self-regulate and find internal balance even while the environment may feel out of balance.

- Ask group members to bring attention to their physical experiences. They can stand up and shift all weight to one foot, then slowly shift to the other, then back again. Or, seated, push each foot hard into the floor or ground. This is a method to release pent-up energy and anxiety.
- Using their senses, invite them to notice a scent, then listen for two sounds, then look at three different things closely, then feel four sensations (temperature, material on clothing against their skin, firmness of their chairs, or the inhaling and exhaling of their breath) and then reverse the order. They can notice: are their muscles tight or relaxed?
- Bring focus to the main muscle groups of the body, step by step, and invite them to “tense up, hold, and let go” various isolated muscle groups, such as arms, back, legs, feet, neck and face.

- **Music**

Take suggestions from group members for music that makes them feel safe, good, and positive; then listen together. Invite the youth to share what they like about the song.

- **Games**

Break up intensity in groups with some light-hearted play. Physical games such as Speed (or Slow) Stretch: everyone stands in a circle, a leader begins a stretch and

each successive person does the same stretch all the way around the circle creating a wave, then the next person begins a different stretch. Balloon races, blowing bubbles (all ages like them), fidget toys, paper airplane folding and flying contests, making silly faces, or crumpled paper “basketball” toss contests into a center basket can.

- **Expressive arts**
Activities can encourage use of their voices through spoken word, drawing, sculpting with clay, movement. Whether quietly, with instrumental music in the background, or with informal conversations, having hands-on materials or specific tasks can be relaxing.
- **Invite reviews, feedback, favorite and least favorite aspects of their experiences, and their recommendations for an even better program.** As providers, we want to know what group members value. Make time regularly and at concluding sessions for their input. Use the Girls Circle Feedback Form or Council Feedback Form in the appendix of the Facilitator Manuals, the Girls Circle Post-Survey including Satisfaction Survey, or create one that addresses more specific themes and activities covered during your sessions. Written and/or verbal feedback help youth have a way to feel, think, and connect to the experiences and people that have impacted them, and to tell others what is true for them. They can “leave their mark” and help shape future group activities.
- **Celebrate changes.** At closing sessions or when youth are moving on, offer ways for group members to be recognized by each other. See the section “**Closures and Closing Rituals**” for specific suggestions, pgs.6-9.
- **Notice your own way of managing transitions.** Share your feelings with colleagues, and recognize that many good-byes or changes can be hard for service providers, too. Build self care and celebrations with peers to honor your own experience.

HIGH TRANSITION SETTINGS

In **high-transition settings** such as homeless centers, drop-in centers and detention facilities, Girls Circle and The Council groups can also provide a positive structure. Although these models have greatest impact in “closed” groups over a period of time, Girls Circles and Boys Councils are helpful approaches for “open” groups. Since youth come and go frequently, attendance is unpredictable, and participants and providers often do not know if the girl or boy will be returning, build the high transition programs to manage these uncertainties as consistently as possible. By doing the same thing each time newcomers enter the group or someone leaves or has left group you can reduce anxiety for the participants about what to expect. Provide as much choice and control as possible within the sessions. Provide lower-risk ways to participate (i.e. observe, say one thing, simple choice responses, finishing incomplete sentences, verbal or nonverbal, show of hands, pass, etc.)and encourage self-determination of level of sharing.

Remember the 3 keys to reducing stress in youth: ***predictability, choices, and social connections***¹ are core elements to creating safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGH TRANSITION SETTINGS:

- Run each group session as a standalone session.
- Welcome and introduce new members and acknowledge those who are leaving or have left. Develop brief, consistent Welcoming and Farewell ceremonies with your group, something that helps everyone manage the emotional challenges of changes and separations in a connected way.
- Invite group members to tell newcomers about the purpose of the group.
- Explain confidentiality and mandated reporting each session.
- Ask the group members to share their group agreements and confidentiality policies at each meeting. This builds buy-in for new participants while building leadership and reinforcement for all members.
- Use the format of the 6 steps (Girls Circle) and 7 steps (The Council for Boys and Young Men).
- Affirm newcomers and more experienced members at the time of the closing ritual each time.

CASE EXAMPLE #1: HIGH TRANSITION SETTING

Community Detention and Alternative Detention Settings Community Partners in Action (CPA), Hartford, CT

Doreen Thompson, Complex Manager, and a licensed Girls Circle Trainer, directs detention centers for girls and for boys. Girls Circle and Boys Council groups are integral components of programming.

1. We present Girls Circle and Boys Council groups to our clients at the time of intake, provide a brief overview, and encourage them to ask their peers about the groups. Some clients have a choice of participation.
2. At the beginning of each group that has a new client, group members review the Community Guidelines. The facilitator asks the new client if there are any guidelines they would like to add and asks the group if there is any guideline that needs to be revised or removed.
3. Because the group population may change from session to session, the curriculum presented is based on the needs of the current population, rather than following a curriculum manual from start to finish. Groups determine the topic for the next session at the end of each session. We stick to the six-step Girls Circle format or seven-step Boys Council format for consistency.
4. Confidentiality and Mandated Reporting are explained to all clients at the time of intake and are part of the program culture. Clients still discuss issues in group even though they know staff is required to report.
5. When we know clients are being discharged, group members go around the circle or council and give positive comments about the client leaving. The client also comments on what they learned from group.

Doreen Thompson

Ms. Thompson's program practices inform, invite, and involve youth at **every** stage of their experience in the setting. Additionally, they use consistent processes so that everyone can more effectively adjust to the rapid changes occurring. These trauma-responsive practices build safety while promoting leadership and relationships during times of change and uncertainty.

CLOSURES AND CLOSING RITUALS

The ending of a group marks a special point and space in time. Creating a closing ritual that brings gratitude and ceremony around the ending of your group will send members off with a positive tone and will bring awareness to the group's communal energy and shared experiences together. Closing rituals aim at preserving the values and sentiments of the group and intensify the solidarity that has been achieved during the time that was spent together.

When creating a closing ritual, infuse meaning, purpose, ceremony, and “pause” to the closing session by being fully present and in the moment up to the final shared moments together. Put aside any other logistical related tasks to your final group and spend time to acknowledge and celebrate the completion and ending of your group's time together and the importance of the relationships that were created, formed and nurtured. The relationships that were created are what enabled the group's depth of experiences, learning, growth, shared struggles, and success. The length and depth of the closing ritual can vary depending on your group, how long it met for, the depth and breadth of connections and accomplishments, etc. Use your own judgment with regard to the scope of your closing ritual. Be mindful about planning; remember this may be the last chance you have to leave an imprint on an adolescents experience with your Council or Circle. A closing that is meaningful can remain in their minds forever.

Preparing for a Closing Ritual: While preparing for a closing ritual as a facilitator, ask yourself:

- What was significant? What brought meaning to our group?
- What connected us together as a group? How did our relationships change? Grow?
- What are my intentions for a closing ritual?
- What can we do together to pause and connect to the final moments of our last group together?
- In what ways can this ritual honor each participant and what they've shared – their full humanness, struggles, challenges, conflicts, cohesion?
- How do I want to bring ceremony to our closing and invoke gratitude and appreciation?
- What objects would I want to include in this closing ritual?

Materials for Closing: Gather materials for the closing that would be meaningful and significant to you and your group and that would represent the closing event. Items such as: candles, music, a rock, a picture, scents, flowers, food, pictures, balls, t-shirts, marbles, stones, hats, poems, readings, photos, etc.

Ideas and Examples for Closing Rituals:

- **Girls Circle: Tea Ceremony**
Have a tea ceremony where the girls serve each other mindfully. Create a ritual around preparing each cup of tea slowly with care and attention as though they were preparing it

for their most beloved confidante. Have the girls infuse every gesture with the dignity and grace they would use to prepare something fit for a King/Queen. Each girl receives it with appreciation and gratitude. With each sip, the girls are invited to bring their thoughts for that moment to a point of remembrance of the caring and support that was shared in the group. In this way, they remember that the simple routine of sharing a cup of tea or drink can be turned into a self-rejuvenating, meaningful experience of remembrance and gratitude.

- **Journaling and Creating a Closing Group Poem**

This is an activity that creates a Group Closing Poem without anyone in the group really knowing how it will end up. It can be very powerful.

Ask youth to take a few moments to journal about their experiences in Circle or Council. Play some instrumental music while they are writing. When complete, ask them to pick one sentence from what they wrote that stands out to them that they would like to contribute to a group poem. Then, hand out a piece of paper to the first person in the group and have them write that sentence. Then they fold the paper over their sentence so the next person cannot see the sentence they wrote. Pass the paper around the circle so that each participant adds their sentence without knowing what the members before them wrote. After it goes around the circle, read the group poem that was created collectively. Participants can “title” the poem on their own or if your group has a name they can title it by the group’s name. After the group, make copies of the poem and send or email to participants.

- **Compliment/Appreciation Circle**

One of the most popular types of closing rituals is the Compliment or Appreciation Circle. This activity focuses on honoring each participant, one by one. Generally, one girl or boy is placed in the center of the circle. They can first start with saying what they got out of the group, i.e. appreciations, feelings, what they learned, what they will take with them, etc. After they are complete, then the group tells that person in the middle what they appreciated about them – giving compliments, affirmations, and naming their strengths. When finished, the next person moves to the center of the circle and so on.

- **Statements of Completion**

You can create a ritual around having each participant answer the following question. Follow it up with providing a gift of object to each member that perhaps has meaning for the whole group. You can ask:

- What do you need to say to complete your involvement in this group? Or,
- What do you need to say to be complete?
- Is there anything else? Any thoughts, feelings, unmet expectations, requests, promises, acknowledgments?

- **Graduation Ceremony**

Have an actual graduation ceremony when the group completes. Invite teachers, parents, caregivers to celebrate the youth’s accomplishments and completion of the group. Provide graduation “Certificates of Completion” and conduct a ceremony around the

graduation process and the receiving of certificates. Many facilitators have utilized this tradition and ceremony of graduations with Circles and Councils. This type of closing ceremony can be used with any group, but can be especially important when youth are required to complete Councils or Circles as criteria for their school, involvement with the juvenile justice system, etc.

- **Rite of Passage Ceremony/Ritual**

Create a ritual that celebrates a “Rite of Passage” from your Council or Circle group to going out into the world, or to the next grade, or to the next program, etc. Rites of Passage are often missing in western culture and many girls and boys don’t get the opportunity to experience this type of passage to the next phase of the life. Ceremonialize the rite of passage by symbolizing some type of “passage,” i.e. passing through or under a created arch, stepping over a threshold, walking through the middle of a line of participants (like in a procession), etc. Or it can be more of a challenging passage such as passing through an obstacle and coming out the other end, or going over, under or through something that is difficult, etc. The idea is that the passage has meaning and symbolizes something of value. Once they pass through, they can be welcomed, congratulated, greeted, thanked, and/or honored for passing through and can be gifted with a flower, or object, or stone, diploma, or some other object that has defined meaning by you or by the group.

- **Past/Present/Future Closing Ritual**

Create a ritual around having the participants talk about the past, the present, and their hope for the future. Have them touch on an emotion - gratitude, anticipation, anxiety, or joy. Invite members to share their hopes and joys for others.

- **Closing in Nature**

Simply be quiet and listen to the wind in the trees. Bring your full attention to the sounds present in nature. Talk about nature’s constant presence and our place in it. Invite participants to name an element of nature that can symbolize a quality of the group. Suggest that they can remember that group quality whenever they notice that element of nature.

- **Affirmation Signing**

This is something like the “gameball” or discharge ball in a sports event. Have each of the kids write affirmations on T-shirts, baseballs, footballs, hats, etc. Each participant writes something they appreciate on the object of each member - each participant then takes home the piece as a memento.

- **Goodbye Bags – Girls Circle**

This ritual can be used when either one girl is leaving the group or the group is ending as a whole. The idea is to leave the participant with a “Survival Bag.”

Each bag contains: taffy, a band aid, an eraser, a pencil, a hair elastic, and a tea bag. The symbolism for each object in the bag is as follows:

- Laughy Taffy – To remind her to laugh and stick with it; that she can accomplish anything
- Band Aid – To remind her to heal hurt feelings, hers or someone else's
- Eraser – To remind her to that everyone makes mistakes and it's okay
- Pencil – To remind her to list her blessings everyday
- Hair Elastic – To remind her to be flexible and that things may not always go the way she wants, but it will work out
- Tea Bag – To remind her to relax daily and go over her list of blessings

Process: Give an empty bag to the girl who is leaving. Pass out the objects to be inserted in the bag to the other girls in the group. Each girl puts the object in the bag of the girl who is leaving while reminding her of what it represents. If the group as a whole is ending, a goodbye bag can be given to each girl reviewing the symbolism of the contents.

Optional: The group can decide what types of other objects to add to the goodbye bag that represents something they want to take with them as a reminder.

Source: St. Francis Home for Children, New Haven, CT

CASE EXAMPLE #2: CLOSING PROCESS MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS COUNCIL Franklin Youth Initiative, Franklin Township, NJ

Bruce Medley, FYI Program Coordinator, launched Boys Council as an after school program in 2009.

Bruce Medley wants boys and young men to stay in school and continue their education through graduation and beyond. He sees Boys Council as a foundation that engages boys in leadership. When Franklin Middle School's Boys Council completes its 10th and concluding session, he hosts a graduation ceremony for its members, inviting parents, family, teachers, administrators, the mayor, and city council members. During the ceremony, Mr. Medley speaks to the families and youth.

Parents, and Young Men, today's graduation is a celebration you have earned. This is just one of many graduations ahead. You have eighth grade graduation soon, then high school, college, and other programs. Today, as you, the parents, witness; and you, boys, walk up and receive your certificates; I want you to really FEEL this experience. Take it inside you. Congratulations on your decision.

These ceremonies have been very emotional for all involved.

The boys want to stay connected when the sessions end. Since Mr. Medley and Dennis Lue, co-facilitator, are offering the program to more boys in more groups, he has developed four ways for graduates to stay connected:

1. Once monthly sessions are offered to keep in touch.
2. Three graduates are invited into each new group to serve as role models and peer leaders, together with the adult facilitators.
3. Graduates are invited to apply for a Boys Council summer program that will further leadership development through additional council sessions, résumé development, employment skill building, community service, and athletics, pending grant funding.
4. Mr. Medley is consulting with a local high school teacher, trained on the Boys Council model, to initiate an afterschool high school Boys Council program, to extend the leadership development opportunity into the high school experience.

As the relationships have been building between the boys and their facilitators, youth are attending school more, having fewer behavioral disruptions, and, according to parent responses, showing greater respect within family relationships.

These exemplary programs demonstrate how Girls Circle and The Council for Boys and Young Men can provide safety and promote healthy relationships and resiliency as youth face changes and transitions. Whether the changes are expected, sudden, or unwanted, girls or boys are nevertheless empowered to stay connected, safe, respected and engaged through the process. These practices ensure respect for the bonds and belonging gained in the group.

As one young man stated within his Boys Council group at Franklin Middle School, “This is the first time I have **ever** been a part of something.”

Healthy transitions can vastly increase the likelihood that youth will continue to seek out caring adults, leadership, and positive activities in their continuing path toward young adulthood.

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¹Vance, J.E. (2001) Neurobiological Mechanisms of Psychosocial Resiliency. In Richman, J., M., and Fruser, M.W., (Eds.) *The Context of Youth Violence: Resilience, Risk, and Protection* (electronic resource) (pp. 43-20.) Westport, CT: Praeger