

Strategies and Lesson Plans

Circle of Concern

Grades K - 5

Making Caring Common

Caring Schools Network 2022 - 2023

Updated October 2022

Overview

Recommended time

- 15-35 mins per lesson
- Five lessons in total, one lesson per week

Materials and advance prep

- Review classroom norms ([Appendix 1](#)) at the start of the series of lessons and whenever necessary to support a caring classroom environment
- Lessons may require extra materials and/or minor preparation to implement with fidelity and ease. Adapt as needed for your class, or group of students
- Some lessons incorporate classroom read-alouds; access books ahead of time or use the read-aloud links in [Appendix 3](#).

Objectives

- Develop students' empathy for others
- Build self-awareness around who is in and out of students' circles of concern
- Expand/widen students' Circle of Concern
- Take prosocial actions based on a widened Circle of Concern

Why this matters

In this strategy, students will consider their Circles of Concern and how to expand them. We define a Circle of Concern as: **The group of people who you think about, care about, will have empathy for, and want to offer kindness to.**

Helping students develop greater empathy is essential for building a positive school climate, but equally important is considering who students have empathy for. Children and adults alike are predisposed to empathize with those who are in their own social group. Empathy for many different kinds of people is an important skill and is the basis for children's developing conceptions of and commitments to fairness and justice. The Circle of Concern exercise is designed to help children – and adults – become more aware of those for whom they lack empathy with the goal of expanding their Circle of Concern.

Extension Strategies

Think about adopting a social media awareness campaign such as a page on the school website, Instagram, or blog where students can share actions they have taken to expand their Circle of Concern. You could also do this on a school bulletin or poster board. If there is enthusiasm for expanding this Circle of Concern activity, ask for volunteers to lead the work and make a personal commitment to support them. Think about organizing a classroom or school-level commitment to expanding your Circle of Concern. Students can decide on actions they will take and set goals for those actions. Encourage students to create a virtual poster or visual reminder of their commitment as they progress.

Lesson 1: Understanding Circles of Concern (15-20 minutes)

Introduce Circle of Concern (3 minutes)

Gather your class together for a discussion. Ask them to imagine a scenario where they would be celebrating the birthday of someone they are very close to. Say something like, *“Today I want you to imagine that it is someone’s birthday who you are very close to. Think about who this person is, maybe it’s a best friend, a parent, a sibling. Now, what might you choose to do for them on their birthday?”* Let students volunteer some answers that include the kind and thoughtful actions they might take for the person they are thinking about. After several students have shared, ask them to think of two more people in their lives that they would do the same actions on each of their birthdays. Give students some time to think and share any thoughts they might have. At this point, students should have thought about three people who they are either closest with, or care deeply about.

Modeling Circle of Concern (5 minutes)

Draw a large circle on the board with a stick figure in the middle. Say, *“The people you were imagining are probably the people you care most about. These people fit into what we call ‘your Circle of Concern.’”* Write the words ‘Circle of Concern’ on the board above the circle and provide students with the definition:

A Circle of Concern is the group of people who you think about, care about, will have empathy for, and want to offer kindness to.

Next, write the names of the three people you imagined doing something nice for on their birthdays. Then, add any additional people. As you add them, give explanations as to why they fit into your Circle of Concern. You can say something like, *“I put my co-teacher, my friend, my*

roommate, or my mom, in my Circle of Concern because I love them deeply and I care about them if they get sick or are sad, and I want to help them feel better.”

Identifying Circles of Concern (10 minutes)

Hand out the Circle of Concern graphic organizers ([Appendix 2](#)). Ask students to write the names of the people they are closest to within the circle.

For younger students, you may do this as a group on the board or have students draw pictures of those in their circle.

Group discussion and reflection (10 minutes)

Once everyone has had the opportunity to consider who is in their own Circle of Concern, bring the class back together for a discussion. Ask some or all of the following questions:

- How did you decide who to put in your Circle of Concern?
- Who did you put in your Circle of Concern?
- Are you surprised by how many people you put in?

MCC Tip: Avoid having students share the names of their best friends within the class as it might make others feel badly. Instead, you can ask them to state if they added any classmates or steer the conversation more toward people who do not attend your school.

After reflecting, leave the students with a question to think about in preparation for the next lesson. Ask, “*What would happen if our circles grew and more people were added to our Circle of Concern?*” Tell students to hold onto their responses and think about it until the next lesson. Tell students when you think the next lesson will be.

Lesson 2: Inside/Outside Circles of Concern (25-30 minutes)

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Remind students of what a Circle of Concern is, sharing that it is **a group of people we think about, care about, and interact with in ways that are kind and thoughtful**. Display your Circle of Concern with the inner circle completed. Explain that today students will be thinking about who is currently in the “Outside my Circle of Concern” section on their sheets.

Before students consider who is out of their Circle of Concern, it is important to instill in them the idea that we do not have a limited number of people that we can care about. Students should understand that their inner circles can grow indefinitely because caring about others, thinking about others, and hoping others are well is not something that can run out.

Provide the following analogy to help students understand that Circles of Concern can grow. Say something like, *“Imagine you are standing on the first floor of a building and you look out the window. You can see a few streets and some buildings. Then, if you go up a floor and look out the window you realize you can start to see more, now you can see across the street, some more cars or trees maybe and a bit further. Now, imagine you go up 20 floors. You’re so high up and you can see even further than before, maybe all the way across the town or city. Our Circle of Concern is like the views from the window. Before we grow it, it’s like we are on the first floor, but as we bring more people in, it grows and grows until it is as big as looking out the window of a really tall building.”*

Identifying Outer Circles of Concern (5 minutes)

Have students take out their Circle of Concern sheets from lesson 1 and instruct them to spend about five minutes thinking about who is currently outside their Circle of Concern and that they hope to bring in.

Ask students to begin by thinking about the people they see on a regular basis, maybe on their way to school, in school, in stores, or anyone else in their community. Have students add these people into the outer circle of the Circle of Concern sheet ([Appendix 2](#)).

Grades K-2: If students are not able to write independently, complete the outer circle for the Circle of Concern as a class on the board, creating the same concentric circles so students can visualize how it relates to their inner circle. If you chose to have students start their Circle of Concern independently in the previous lesson, either through drawings or with teacher support, continue in the same format.

Reflecting (5 minutes)

Once everyone has finished brainstorming and writing who is currently outside their Circle of Concern, transition back to the whole group. Invite students to share what they added and thought about during this exercise. Ask students:

- Why do you think those people have been outside your Circle of Concern?
- What does it mean for you and for them that they are outside your Circle of Concern?
- What might it look like/feel like to bring them inside your Circle of Concern?
- Why do you think it's important to think about who is not yet inside your Circle of Concern?

Afterward, thank students for sharing.

Read Aloud (10-12 minutes)

Next, introduce the read aloud, *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams ([Appendix 3](#)). Before starting, ask students to notice who might be in each character's Circle of Concern, and what that looks like. After reading, have a class discussion about how the book relates to the work they just did. Ask questions like:

- How might the story have been different if the neighbors did not care for each other?
- What lesson can this story teach you about the importance of expanding your Circle of Concern?

- Who do you think the main characters would put in their Circles of Concern, and did they change at the end of the book?
- Why do you think it might be important to live in a community with people who have a large Circle of Concern?

Lesson 3: Bring People In (25-30 minutes)

Opening discussion (5 minutes)

Pose the following scenario to students, “*How would you feel if you saw your best friend or sibling or someone you are very close to sitting alone at the playground while everyone else was having fun? What might you do to make them feel better?*”

MCC Tip: Consider adjusting the scenario based on the grade-level and interests of your students. For older students who may spend less time at the playground, the thought experiment might be more appropriate in the context of a cafeteria or related to cyberbullying. Either way, adjust so that students can easily imagine themselves in the scenario.

Wait for student responses then add, “*Now, how can we have that same level of care and empathy for someone else in our community who might not be inside our Circle of Concern yet and why would it be important to our community to treat them as though they are?*” Listen for student responses, and help steer the conversation towards an understanding that caring and having empathy for our broader community is beneficial for all of us and will give us a kinder world to live in. Explain that in today’s lesson, students will be thinking more about the outside circle in the Circles of Concern and how to bring people in.

Read-Aloud (10-12 minutes)

Introduce students to the read-aloud, *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts ([Appendix 3](#)). Say, “*We are going to read a book together. As we read, I want you to think about this question: ‘How did the boy in the book expand his Circle of Concern, and why is that important?’*” After reading, have a class discussion, and ask the following:

- Why do you think the boy changed his mind about what he wanted to do with his shoes?
- Why do you think he didn’t decide to give the shoes to Antonio right away?
- How did the boy feel after giving Antonio his shoes?

- How do you think Antonio felt after receiving the shoes?

As students respond, help steer the conversation to HOW the boy expanded his Circle of Concern, highlighting the fact that he didn't do it right away, but thought about it until he got the courage to do it. The main character developed empathy for Antonio, which helped him make this hard decision. This can help students see that the work of caring for others who you might not initially think to care for can be tricky but is always worth it in the end.

Class Brainstorm (5-10 minutes)

After the read-aloud, invite students to think about how they can expand their Circle of Concerns to bring in people who are in their outside circles. Tell students, *“Right now our inner circles are small, but there is a dotted line between who we have inside our Circle of Concern and who we have outside of our Circle of Concern. Today, we are going to think about the people who are currently out and consider how we can bring them in!”*

As a class, generate a list of ideas to help expand our Circles of Concern. Ask, *“How can we be more aware and appreciative of all members of our school community and larger community?”*

Grades K-2: Rather than have students consider this question on an individual level, brainstorm class-wide actions you can take together to expand your Circle of Concern as one group.

Student responses to the brainstorm might include the following:

- Saying hello or thank you to people they do not usually talk to – for example, new students or the custodian
- Learning the names of the cafeteria workers and thanking them by name
- Noticing when students in their school may need help, even if they are not close friends
- Sharing toys or other special items with others

Student reflections (5 minutes)

After recording your brainstorm ideas follow up with some reflection questions. Ask the following:

- How can expanding our Circles of Concern change a community?
- What will motivate us to expand our Circle of Concern?

- How would you feel to know you were on the outside of someone's Circle of Concern, but now you are on the inside?
- How might you feel if someone did one of these actions for you? How do you think it will make them feel?
- Why is it important to show others that we care about them?
- What might make it hard to do some of these actions? How can we make it easier?

If time allows, have students pick one action to try out on their own before the next lesson. End the lesson by telling students that in the following lesson they will plan ways to complete the actions they brainstormed. Tell them when the next lesson will take place.

Lesson 4: Making a Plan (20-30 minutes)

Introduction (1 minute)

Begin the lesson by displaying the list of ideas for expanding Circles of Concern students generated in the previous lesson. Ask if any students tried these actions and what it felt like to do so. Then say, “*Today we will be turning our ideas from the last lesson into action by coming up with a plan that will help us care for more people and bring in people who are outside of our Circles of Concern.*”

Make a plan (10 minutes)

Grades K-2: Expand Circles of Concern as a class beginning with opening up to the larger school community. Brainstorm a classroom project to be completed together that provides care to the greater school community. Begin with the question, “*What can our class do to show kindness and caring not only in our classroom, but also to our whole school as a way of expanding our Circles of Concern?*” Some ideas might include but are not limited to:

- Start a morning greeting ritual with other classrooms
- Write schoolwide thank you notes
- Decorate a hallway with kind words and affirmations
- Organize a playground clean up
- Plant seeds and deliver the sprouted plants to other classrooms
- Set up a lunch date with another class to get to know more students in your school
- Prepare and perform a song for the school community (or a specific classroom)

MCC Tip: Once you’ve brainstormed, students can break up into groups with different roles for the project, or you can have multiple smaller projects that students can opt into. Either way, the projects’ goals should include group work and expanding to the greater school community.

Grades 3-5: To help anchor students as they begin growing their Circles of Concern, encourage them to start thinking about ways to expand beyond their close relationships at school to others within their school community. Ideas for personal plans might include but are not limited to:

- Ask a new friend to hang out during lunch or free time
- Say thank you to the custodial staff
- Greet students from other classes in the morning
- Write kind notes to school staff, such as custodians, food service teams, administrators, bus drivers
- Set up a buddy partnership where you are paired with a younger student and meet with them or write to them periodically throughout the year
- Plant a tree somewhere on school grounds for all to enjoy
- Notice when people may need a friend, and spend time with them during recess or lunch

MCC Tip: Students can generate their list of ideas individually on scrap paper, or in small groups to help each other think of more ideas.

At the end of the brainstorming time, students, individually (grades 3-5) or as a class (grades K-2) should commit to actions they want to take.

Work time (10-20 minutes)

Once the whole class has committed to the action/s they want to take toward expanding their Circles of Concern, begin a work time where students will determine the next steps necessary to seeing their plan through and spend some time working toward their plan. You may want to provide students with more time before the next lesson to execute their plans. Be sure to let students know that they will be completing these actions before the next lesson.

Grades 3-5: Provide students with the Making a Plan Worksheet ([Appendix 4](#)), so students can plan out and answer questions about the steps they will be taking for expanding their Circles of Concern. Once completed, and if time allows, students can start working toward their plan or check in with a teacher to make sure their plan is doable and effective.

Grades K-2: Consider using select questions in [Appendix 4](#) to discuss as a whole class. Break up students into smaller groups to help manage the classroom project. Assign roles, and start working toward your plan.

Debrief (1 minute)

End the lesson with a formal or informal check in, ensuring that everyone has either made some progress toward their plan or knows what their next steps are to complete the action before the next lesson. If students will require more in class work time, discuss when that will be. For K-2, be sure to complete the action as a class before the next lesson. Let students know when the next lesson will be.

Lesson 5: Expanding More (15-20 minutes)

Introduction (1 minutes)

Begin the lesson by checking in on whether students were able to complete the kind action they planned for in the previous lesson. Take a poll or ask questions to get a sense of where students are and if there were any blockers preventing students from following through on their plans. Then say, *“Today we are going to think about what was successful about our actions of expanding our Circles of Concern and then work on expanding them even more!”*

Reflecting on actions taken (5-8 minutes)

Grades K-2: Since students will have done their kind action as a group, take this time to recap the things everyone did, the roles different students played, and how it felt. Ask the following questions:

- What work did you do to expand your Circle of Concern?
- How did others react to the action you took?
- How do you think your action made others feel?
- How do you think it might have changed the community? Why is this important?
- What was hard about doing this action?

Grades 3-5: Cut out, ask aloud, or write on the board reflection questions for students to answer in a pair-share or small groups ([Appendix 5](#)). Alternatively, if students want to answer questions independently, they can answer the questions on the worksheet provided.

Expanding More (10-15 minutes)

After students have spent some time thinking about their work and what was effective, ask them to create a plan to further expand their Circles of Concern. In the previous lesson, students should have focused on expanding at a smaller scale, most likely within their school community. Now, encourage them to think beyond the school and to expand to their neighborhood, town, or broader community. Just like in Lesson 4, give students time to brainstorm and new ways to care for others who are not yet in their Circles of Concern.

Grades K-2: Now that you have completed a classroom project for the school community, come up with another group project, this time for the broader community. Some options might include the following:

- Neighborhood clean up
- Thank you notes for people in the community, such as bus drivers
- Clothing or toy drive

Once your class has committed to an action, spend some time working toward it.

Grades 3-5: Students should now be encouraged to think about people or places in their broader community that they want to support. Consider giving students another Making a Plan sheet ([Appendix 4](#)), brainstorming ideas as a class, or letting students get started independently.

Debrief and Reflect (5-8 minutes)

At the end of the lesson, bring students together to discuss their plans and how it has felt to work on expanding their Circles of Concern. Pass out students' Circle of Concern sheets from the first lessons. Give them time to include new people or make changes to their sheet based on the work they've done. Hopefully, students will find that their inner circles are beginning to include more people than when they began. After, ask questions to the class like:

- What was easy about working to expand your Circle of Concern? What was difficult?
- How have you expanded your Circle of Concern?
- How has expanding your Circle of Concern changed the way that you think and act?

- Who remains outside your Circle of Concern and what do you think you can do to change that? What will be most challenging?
- How can we encourage other students to expand their Circles of Concern?

Appendix 1: Recommended Elementary Classroom Norms and Moral Principles

1. Consider **WHAT** someone said, not **WHO** said it
2. Assume that we all mean well and are trying our best.
3. You are responsible for your actions.
4. If you leave class with questions, it's ok and it's likely.
5. Be present, continue to listen and learn
6. Avoid generalizations about people, races, ethnicities, or economic class.
7. Think about who is in the room and how what you say can affect them.
8. Remember that we are all learning together and have different strengths and knowledge.

9. Mistakes are OK. They help us learn and grow.
10. When mistakes and conflicts happen, keep them in the classroom
11. Respect each other's privacy. Share lessons from class, not people's stories. Sensitive topics that are shared in the classroom should stay in the classroom.
12. Be open to learning something new or changing your opinions and beliefs.
13. When you disagree with someone, challenge yourself to ask kind questions and listen carefully.

If someone says something that is hurtful, help them understand how they hurt you without causing shame, or speak with them privately.

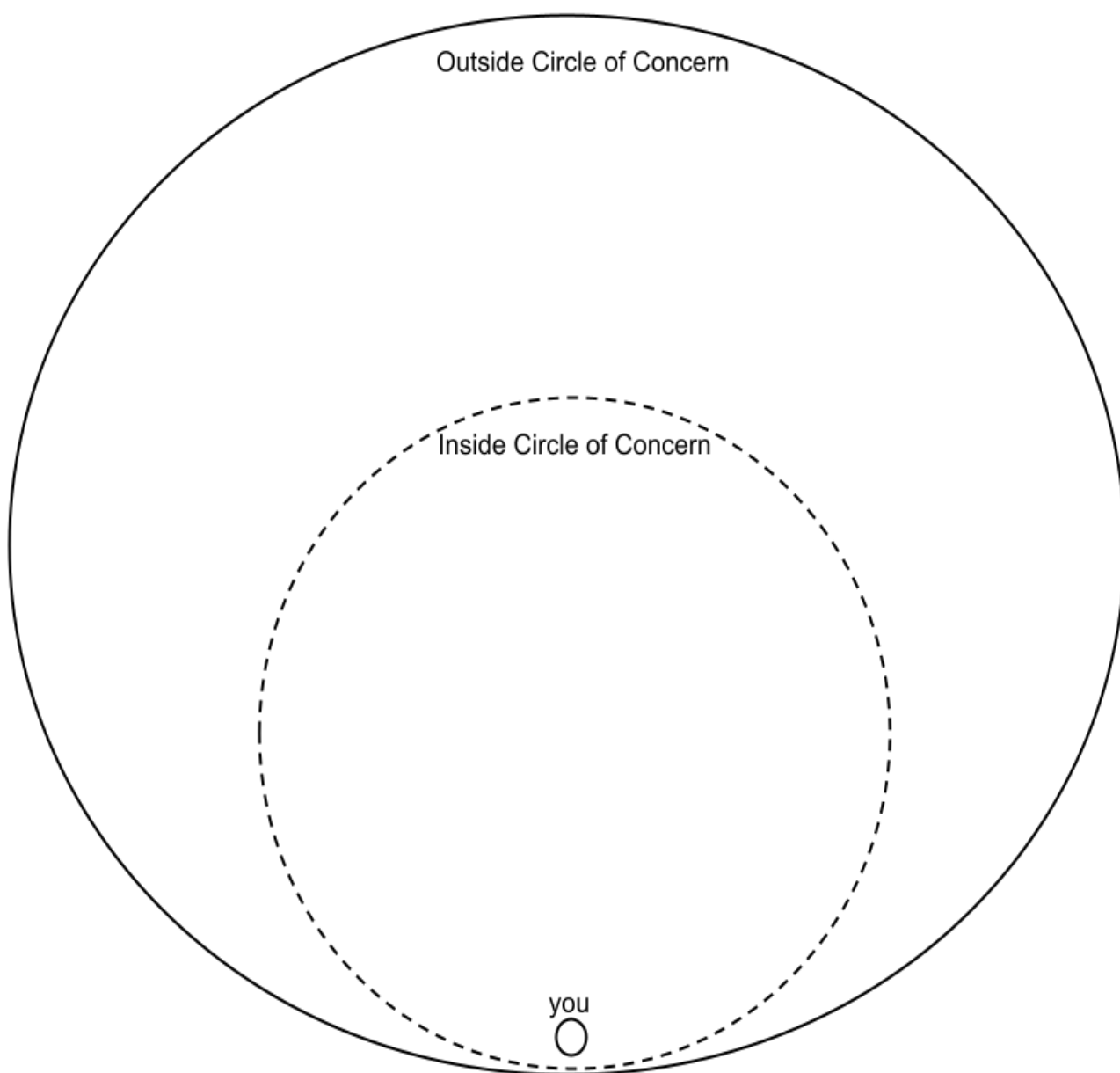
14. When challenges come up, work to build a classroom community that is kind, honest, forgiving, and fair.

Appendix 2: Circle of Concern Template

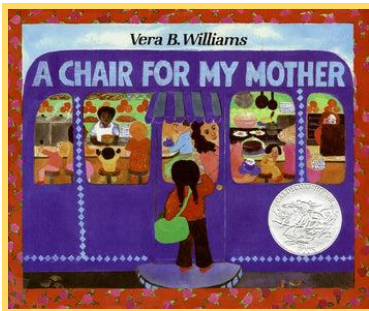
Directions:

- Provide each student with a Circle of Concern template on **page 16**
- For Lesson 1, students will not be writing into the Outside Your Circle of Concern section. Remind them to save this space for the later lessons

Name: _____



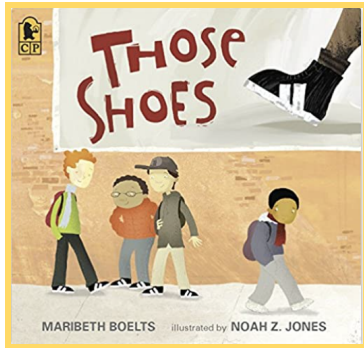
Appendix 3: Recommended Reading & Media List



[A Chair for My Mother](#), by Vera B. Williams. Published by Greenwillow Books

[A Chair for my Mother YouTube Read-Aloud](#)

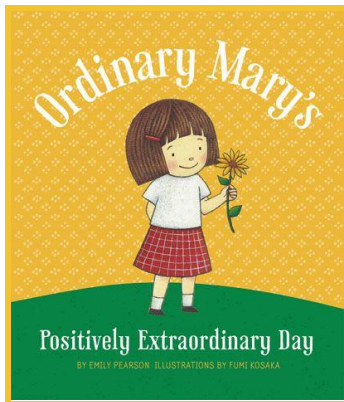
Description: Used in Lesson 2. A girl and her mother are grateful for the help of friends and neighbors after losing their belongings in a fire. Together they save coins to buy a new comfortable chair.



[Those Shoes](#) written by Maribeth Boelts and illustrated by Noah Z. Jones. Published by Candlewick Press.

[Those Shoes YouTube Read-Aloud](#)

Description: Used in Lesson 3. Jeremy wants a pair of popular, but expensive shoes. He finds a pair at a thrift store, but they are too small. Faced with a tough decision he chooses kindness.



[Ordinary Mary's Positively Extraordinary Day](#) written by Emily Pearson. Published by Gibbs Smith.

[Ordinary Mary's Positively Extraordinary Day YouTube Read-Aloud](#)

Description: Mary's small act of kindness inspires a waterfall of kind actions by others.



[Be Kind](#) by Pat Zietlow Miller. Published by Roaring Brook Press.

Description: What does it mean to be kind? This book explores ways, both big and small, we can spread kindness.

[Be Kind YouTube Read-Aloud](#)



[Be Kind](#) by Zak Abel

Description: A fun song about spreading kindness.

Appendix 4: Make A Plan Worksheet

Directions:

Grades K-2: Option to ask and answer the questions on the sheet as a whole group

Grades 3-5: To be used as individual worksheets

- Print out copies of the Make a Plan worksheet on **page 20**
- Give students time to answer the questions to help hold themselves accountable and reflect on the process

Name: _____

Expanding My Circle of Concern: Planning Sheet

1. What action did you choose to take toward expanding your Circle of Concern?

2. Who does this action impact? Who is being brought IN?

3. How/Why do you think this action will demonstrate to the people involved that you care about them?

4. What steps do you need to take in order to see your plan through? (Outline steps, timeline, or plan details)

5. What challenges do you imagine might arise? How can you prepare for these challenges?

Making Predictions:

6. How do you think following through with this action/plan will affect you or make you feel?

7. How do you think following through with this action/plan will affect the person/people it is directed towards?

Appendix 5: Reflection Resource

Directions:

- Use the reflection questions below in pair-shares or small groups
- Considering cutting out the prompts into slits of paper, asking them aloud to the class, or writing them on the board
- Alternatively, print out copies of the Reflection Worksheet on **page 23** for students who prefer to work independently and in writing

Reflection Questions:

1. Was it easy or challenging to follow through on your commitments to reach out to people outside your Circle of Concern? Why?
2. If you followed through, how did it make you feel? How did it make others feel?

3. If you encountered challenges, what could you do individually (or could we do as a community) to overcome those challenges next time?

4. If you encountered challenges, what could you do individually (or could we do as a community) to overcome those challenges next time?

5. Why does expanding our Circle of Concern matter? Do you believe these actions are changing our community? If so, how?

Name: _____

Reflection Resource

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3. If you encountered challenges, what could you do individually (or could we do as a community) to overcome those challenges next time?

4. Why does expanding our Circle of Concern matter? Do you believe these actions are changing our community? If so, how?
