

Getting the most out of your learning circle

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1. Introduction

Crime, crime prevention, safety and justice are important issues. Crime and fear of crime cost us money as a community, and they cost us personally—as victims or because fear affects how we behave (like not going out at night, or not using public transport). But people often think these are issues for someone else to deal with—governments, by funding more police, or local councils, by cleaning up graffiti and installing better street lighting. But there are things we can do—as individuals, as members of a community, or in partnership with councils, governments or community organisations. Every day we help shape our community by our actions and inactions.

What causes crime? What impact does it have—on the community and the economy? What can we do to prevent crime? How can we help friends or family deal with a fear of crime that is much greater than the real risk? How can we work with local authorities to keep our local area safe? How can we influence decisions at a local, state, national or global level?

As participants in a learning circle on *Crime prevention and community safety* you will explore these issues and more. You will also find out how ordinary people have come together to make their environment safer and how you can contribute to making your community safer and more enjoyable.

This module is designed to help everyone in your group get the most out of the learning circle. It provides background information about learning circles. It gives some advice for those taking on the role of facilitator, outlining things you need to know about your job and providing suggestions for dealing with practical issues. It briefly touches on some of the ways adults learn, introducing the different approaches you may find in your group.

2. What is a learning circle?

- A learning circle is a group of people who meet regularly to discuss, explore and learn about issues that concern them, their communities or the wider society.
- Groups determine their own objectives and set their own pace. Learning is supported by background materials to draw out life experiences, encourage discussion and enable everyone to develop their own views and explore these with others.
- Learning circles meet in small groups (usually 5–15 participants) once or twice a week for a number of weeks, generally for around two hours at a time.
- Learning circles are a way of sharing and gaining information. They encourage inquiry, debate and action. They are a way to make new friends, explore ideas and share experiences. Learning circles give you the information, opportunity and ideas to make up your own mind and make your own decisions. They are a great way for people to explore issues, to problem-solve, to develop their ideas about how to tackle challenges facing their community.

Why crime prevention learning circles?

A learning circle on crime prevention can be a way to increase community awareness of crime prevention and address fear of crime as well as help communities to be more effective in their crime prevention activities.

Who is the learning circle for?

All kinds of people should get something out of this learning circle and the kit.

- You can use it if you like the sense of community in your area and want to protect it or if you're concerned about the safety of your neighbourhood at night.
- As a young person, you might want to do something so shopkeepers don't see you as a threat just because you meet friends at the local mall.
- As a voter you might want information so you can make sense of claims by one politician that more money for police has reduced crime, while the opposition says crime is increasing and we need to do more.
- You might use this kit if you are worried about being assaulted and want to understand the risk and how to reduce it.
- You may be a parent who wants to get involved in practical activities to build a safer local community or a shop owner who wants to reduce shoplifting. Maybe you just want to know more about crime prevention or the links between drugs and crime, or understand debates about zero tolerance policing.
- You may want to learn about and encourage ideas on reducing vandalism and graffiti. You might find the kit useful if you want to challenge views about ethnic 'gangs'.
- As an offender or former offender you might find the kit helps you to understand the factors that influence involvement in crime or that promote more informed community debate about justice and the legal process.

Possible outcomes from your learning circle

The aim of this learning circle is not to learn a lot of facts or for everyone to reach agreement. The idea is to provide each person with the chance to understand more about the issues covered and with the tools and confidence to act on his or her beliefs, with everyone learning something from one another.

Learning circles also provide the opportunity for taking action, although doing so is up to individuals. For many people, exploring issues will be enough. For others, making changes in their own life may be the outcome, or writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper about their concerns. Others may set up a group in their local area to take action on the issue they are concerned about. By allowing people to see that change is possible, learning circles encourage ongoing community participation. But it's also important that people have fun and learn in a comfortable environment. Basically, you decide where you want to go and what you want to get out of the learning circle.

Possible activities you might undertake

- Talk about issues from your learning circle with friends, family or workmates.
- Become more observant, keeping an eye on your neighbour's property, kids etc.
- Ask considered questions of decision makers and community leaders.
- Get involved in developing a community safety plan in your local neighbourhood.

- Get involved in increasing opportunities for young people in your area.
- Establish a rapid-response group to clean up graffiti in your neighbourhood.
- Join a prison visits program.
- Get involved with a community safety audit in your local area. (Safety audits are detailed inspections of an area by a team of locals who identify conditions that help to create opportunities for crime and environments that might encourage crime and create fear of crime.)
- Read more about crime prevention.
- Take some simple steps to reduce your risk of burglary, like locking doors and windows when you go out.
- Form a group with other business people to look at ways of reducing shoplifting.
- Encourage your workplace to look at training for key staff on fraud reduction.

3. How is the learning circle kit organised?

The kit is organised into eight modules and a Facilitator's Guide. *Getting the most from your learning circle* provides a process for the group to decide its priorities and agree how it will work together. It's a good idea to sort these things out right at the start.

Setting the scene provides an opportunity to discuss general issues around crime, crime prevention and community safety. It also provides some tools and ideas that should help your discussions, regardless of what issues you focus on. Every group is encouraged to look at this module—it explores approaches and ideas that you may find useful whatever issues you decide to discuss.

This overview module is followed by six others that focus on specific issues or types of crime that many people are concerned about: *Personal violence*, *Property crime*, *Crime at work*, *Public safety/Getting around safely*, *Drug-related crime*, and *Law and justice*. You don't have to use them all, or in a particular order.

You can work through a module from start to finish. This may be a good way to start if your group is not sure what it is really interested in. Or you may decide to focus on a couple of issues only.

Each module includes much more material than most groups will get through in one meeting. This is intentional—different groups will be interested in different things. You will need to make choices about how to spend your time. You can always change your initial decisions as you get more involved and interested in particular issues.

4. A facilitator, not a teacher

The word 'facilitator' can mean a range of things. Some people earn their living as professional facilitators. But the word is also used more generally, to mean someone who helps you to make things happen or who makes things easier. That's the role of a learning circle facilitator.

A facilitator in a learning circle is not expected to be an expert or know more than others in the group do. A learning circle is based on the idea that everyone learns from each other and everyone has something to contribute.

The main task of a facilitator is to help the group decide what issues to focus on and to be organised and familiar enough with the issues to help discussion flow. If you are the facilitator for a meeting, you can help the group work well together by setting a positive tone and letting others have their say before expressing your views—so people don't expect you to always take the lead. Your role is also

to see that everyone actively participates and no one person or group dominates. In a learning circle, each person needs to take responsibility for his or her learning and for the outcomes.

Going through the relevant module and thinking about it before your group meets will help you be effective. You need to see that practical tasks get done, but you don't have to do them yourself. The group can share tasks like making sure everyone has what they need for the session (for example, photocopies of the relevant module, butcher's paper or a white- or blackboard and pens, maybe a video player) or collecting notes to be stored.

5. Dealing with disclosures

Emotion, anger and sensitivity

People will come to a learning circle with a wide variety of interests, views, attitudes and personal experiences. This is one of the features that makes learning circles such effective environments within which to discuss, explore, learn and problem-solve. Everyone has experiences, views or attitudes from which others can learn something—it could be something like the importance of tackling prejudice or how to argue effectively against a position you strongly disagree with.

Issues around crime, fear of crime and safety can be very emotional for some people. If their lives have been directly affected by crime, they may respond to discussions in a personal way, or tend to dismiss the views of people who haven't had the same experience. Where the crime involves a person rather than property, responses may be very strong. It's important to acknowledge and respect people's feelings and experiences, even if you do not share them. A learning circle works best when people feel safe and comfortable about expressing themselves.

Think about these issues at your first meeting and address them in your ground rules.

Suggestions for dealing with disclosures

- Listen. Don't interrupt.
- Give positive feedback. For example, 'This is never an easy thing to talk about. You are being courageous in telling your story ...'
- Be non-judgmental. Try not to show specific emotions like shock at what is said.
- Believe, and affirm that you believe, what they are saying.
- This is their story, not yours. Empathise but don't focus on things that happened to you.
- Don't counsel the person. Refer them to appropriate people if they want counselling.
- Don't make promises and commitments you can't keep.
- Keep your opinions about their abuser, or their behaviour if they are the abuser, to yourself.
- Find out what their present situation is. If a group member is experiencing violence, give them information to enable them to make decisions about what to do about it.

Victims and perpetrators

Your group may contain both victims/survivors of crime and people who have committed a crime. A wide range of activities is covered by the word 'crime'; it's likely that members of the group may have offended, even if they don't recognise it. Nonetheless, given general attitudes about crime, you may find some members of the group show prejudice towards someone who has offended.

Crime can have very direct and personal impacts on people's lives—whether they are victim/survivors, perpetrators or people whose daily activities are influenced by concerns about safety. Acknowledge and respect people's feelings and experiences, even if you do not share them. For your learning circle to work well, people need to feel comfortable about expressing themselves.

6. Adults learning

This section highlights some factors that help adults learn. You may find it useful in understanding the different ways people respond. Your learning circle will work best if the group looks for different ways of presenting and exploring information—activities, discussion in pairs, story-telling, drawing, visual presentations, videos, guest speakers etc.

Linking ideas to life experiences

Most adults find it easier to learn new concepts and facts if these are linked to something they know or have experienced. For example, if the group is struggling to understand why women do not leave violent husbands, you could ask people to think about how hard it would be to pack up and leave the homes they have created. Many people make sense of abstract ideas or complex concepts by relating them to something they are familiar with or know about.

Participation

Adults learn better when they have some control over, and input into, their learning. Learning circles recognise this—by putting participants in charge of their learning and drawing on their life experiences.

Fun

People find learning easier if they are having fun and the learning environment is informal and relaxed. Not all of the issues you will cover lend themselves to the group having fun but it should be possible to be relaxed and informal. Brainstorming can be a fun way to encourage creativity. If people know they can say anything they will have fun without needing much direction.

Individual differences

People are different and they learn in different ways. Some people enjoy listening to discussions and conversations and then reflecting on what they heard or relating it to their own experience. Others learn by watching people do things—and like things such as role-plays or stories of approaches tried by someone else. Some people like practical learning experiences—learning by doing. Others prefer emotional experiences. Some learn by writing down everything someone says.

7. Practical issues

Sorting out a few practical details should help your learning circle work well and allow the group to contribute to community safety and crime prevention.

Taking notes

You might find it useful to keep track of the work of your learning circle so everyone can see how views and ideas have developed and can share their experiences with other groups. Written notes may also provide points about your group's activities that could be included in a newsletter or on a website. Groups can then learn from one another and participants see outcomes from their activities. Keeping notes shows that the knowledge and experiences of members are valued.

Note-taking doesn't need to be a big job. Notes could cover what the group discussed, key points that came up, what actions or activities the group got involved in, visiting speakers, videos watched etc. If the group decides to take notes, you might discuss whether one person should do the job or it will be shared, and what to record.

Visiting speakers

Listening to and talking with people who are actively involved in an issue can be a great way to get a subject across. But coming to a meeting of your group may mean for the speaker spending time away from family or friends or from their workplace. If your group wants to invite a speaker—say a local community representative, a politician, a representative from an offenders group or an expert in crime prevention—be aware of the commitment this involves for the speaker. If the person accepts the invitation, find a way to show that the group appreciates the time they have contributed (for example, provide a meal). You might check whether the speaker needs transport to and from the meeting and indicate the range of people in your group. You might also consider joining with another learning circle group in your area when planning a guest speaker to reduce the demand on the speaker's time.

8. The first meeting

Introduction

The first meeting of a learning circle is very important. Members of your group need to get to know each other and the interests, experiences and expectations you bring to the group. You need to discuss what you want from your time together and agree on some objectives. You need to agree on how you will work together, including some ground rules and procedures to help your meetings run smoothly. You need to take some initial decisions about what issues to focus on—although you may change your mind or add in other things as you get going. And you need to sort out practical arrangements so that you can enjoy yourselves and make effective use of your time.

Getting to know each other

An important aim of the first meeting is for people to get to know each other, their interests, why they joined the group and what they want to achieve.

Often learning circles are organised or coordinated by an organisation (like a neighbourhood house, a library, a trade union, a workplace or a faith group). If so, they may arrange for refreshments for the first meeting, or suggest participants bring something to share when confirming arrangements for the first meeting. Alternatively, if a facilitator has been identified, that person might arrange things. Having some food or drink can help make the meeting more relaxed and social. If not all members of the group know one another, mingling informally can be a good way to break the ice.

Activity

If you are a group that meets regularly, you could skip this activity.

- Split into pairs, with one participant asking questions of the person sitting next to them before switching roles. Ask the person about their background, any special interests and why they joined the learning circle. After five minutes or so, each person should introduce their 'pair' to the group.

It might be helpful for someone to take brief notes. Allow time for follow-up questions.

If your group has a sponsor organisation (for example, your community organisation, faith group or adult learning association), this is a good time for a representative to talk about why they are involved.

Step one: agreeing on some objectives

The aim is to give participants the opportunity to agree on what they want to get out of the learning circle. Some people may say they want to learn more about the issues; others will have more specific objectives. If the group can agree on common objectives, this is great. But it is not essential. In the end, each participant is responsible for his or her own learning objectives.

Activity: Where do we want to get to?

- What do you want to get out of this learning circle? What are your expectations? Take a few minutes to think about this. Then make a list (use a board or butcher's paper). Do this so each person contributes one item at a time. Allow some time for follow-up questions. See if there are areas where everyone agrees.
- Try to identify some group objectives, so your meetings focus on what the group most wants to achieve. The objectives need to be realistic, achievable, stated clearly, and observable so participants can see the results. The group needs to decide whether its objectives will be determined by consensus or whether it will also pursue some objectives that are supported by a majority. Remember that each person will take different things from the learning circle even when everyone has agreed on shared objectives. People's personalities and life skills affect how they experience and learn.
- Keep a list of common objectives and check that they are being met as your meetings progress.

Step two: agreeing on themes and topics

Learning circles are intended to be flexible. The kit is a resource, not something you have to work through from start to finish. But there is a lot of material here so your group could easily meet for, say, 10 sessions of around two hours each. You may want to focus on only three modules and spend a couple of sessions on each. Your group may prefer to meet more regularly for shorter periods—say an hour at lunchtime twice a week. Some groups may want to use the learning circle to develop a local community safety plan and find that what works for them is a half-day planning session one weekend a month.

Activity

- Look through the modules and highlight the issues and topics that interest you most.
- Go around the group, with each person stating their preferences. Someone should write down the main points on a board or butcher's paper and note how many people are interested in particular issues. Use the main points to work out a program. It should be challenging but realistic, particularly about how many times you will meet and whether you will do anything between meetings (for example, reading, research, outings or activities).

This is an important part of the learning circle process. It may take some time to reach agreement.

If your group is finding it hard to come to an agreement because people are interested in different things or feel they don't know enough yet to decide priorities, try agreeing on what you will cover over the next two weeks. By then, you may have a clearer idea of what you want to do. And remember, the group can always change focus as it goes along.

Step three: sorting out practical details

To make your meetings work well, you'll need to agree on a few practical details:

- where you will meet and how often
- starting and finishing times for meetings
- arrangements for breaks
- sharing out any preparation tasks, including decisions about whether to provide refreshments and how this will be done
- who will facilitate meetings (This may be the same person or you may want to share the job around.)
- whether you want to keep brief notes of your meetings.

Helping out

Apart from participating actively in the discussions, you can contribute to the group in other ways. You may be able to:

- search for additional resource materials or share with the group interesting articles, books or videos you have come across
- research a particular issue
- arrange for a guest speaker or a group visit
- prepare/organise refreshments
- take a turn at facilitating the group.

Recording the group's plans

You might find it helpful to record the group's plans and agreements in a table like the one below and then make a copy for each participant. This should provide you and the other participants with a firm base from which to work.

Who are we: interests etc	Learning objectives	Topics/themes the group will focus on	Practical agreements

Step four: Setting some ground rules

The group needs to agree on some basic ground rules for meetings that they feel comfortable with, such as listening to one another, letting everyone have a say, respecting people's right to hold different views. This is a really important step and will give you a framework to help keep discussion on track. Some guidelines are provided. See what the group thinks of them and note any changes. Everyone in the group should get a copy of what is agreed.

Having some ground rules for your meetings will help keep them productive and fair, particularly if discussion gets a bit heated or someone tries to dominate the session. Set out below are guidelines that have been developed by other learning circle participants. Most of the suggestions are common sense and you've probably used them yourself in the past without realising it. Some of the ideas are adapted, with thanks, from the publication *The ABC to Learning Circles* (Australian Association of Adult and Community Education, now Adult Learning Australia). If you think something has been left out, add it in. The main thing is to agree on some principles that work for you. The rules are for everyone to use to help keep activities focused, productive and under control.

Activity: Getting along, getting ahead

- This learning circle will be what your group makes it. You might start by sharing positive and negative experiences you may have had in discussion groups and meetings in the past. Discuss ways of avoiding the things people didn't like.
- Read the suggestions below. Change those you don't agree with and add any others agreed by the group. Everyone should get a copy of what is agreed to.

Listen carefully. Make sure the group hears what each member has to offer.

Maintain an open mind. Be prepared to explore ideas that you might have rejected in the past.

Consider opposing viewpoints. Understanding someone's point of view doesn't mean adopting it, or even being sympathetic to it.

Help keep the discussion on track. Don't leave this up to the facilitator. Try to make your own comments relate to the main points being discussed.

Speak freely, but don't dominate. If you are a good talker, encourage others to discuss their ideas. If you tend to be quiet, try to have your say more often. Find ways to ensure everyone is heard.

Talk to the group as a whole, not to the facilitator. Feel free to ask questions directly to other group members, especially those who aren't saying much.

If you don't understand something, say so. Other people probably feel the same way.

Value your own experience and understanding. Everyone has a contribution to make.

Be prepared to disagree. Conflict is healthy and can help a group progress. But focus on the issue, not the person you disagree with.

Try not to become angry or aggressive. This attitude might discourage others from expressing their ideas.

9. Reading between the lines: messages and interests

Information about our society and current issues is presented in a variety of ways. It might be in a newspaper, on television, on the Internet, in movies or a radio report, in a brochure or on a billboard. It may be in education material prepared for use in schools, or for informal use by community groups.

People who provide information about an issue are likely to have an interest in how that issue is presented. Choosing to include a particular issue represents a value judgment about its importance. The way that information is presented also represents a value judgment. It may be that emphasis is given to a particular viewpoint while other viewpoints are ignored, given less prominence or discredited. Material can convey messages without being obviously biased.

One way to manage this issue of values and perspectives is to ensure that a range of viewpoints on an issue is presented. This is the approach for which this learning circle strives.

Critical thinking

Thinking critically isn't the same as being critical. It means questioning, reflecting, asking why. It

means examining your own beliefs, values and behaviours and trying to make sense of them. It means trying to understand the reasons behind a particular view in a news report or in your group. It involves analysing information rather than taking it at face value—asking things like:

- What is the main point being made? How does it connect with other arguments being made?
- Are facts being used to support an argument? Are they accurate? Do they fit with my experiences?
- Where does this information come from? Does the person or organisation have particular interests that might influence their view? Will they benefit if they convince others to take the same view? Does this affect how you assess the information?
- Do the arguments being used rely on assumptions? Are the assumptions reasonable?

Thinking critically helps you to make sense of information and assess its value for yourself, rather than just accepting it without question.

Media

The media play an important role in telling us about the world we live in. But obviously they can't tell us about everything that happens. There isn't the money or the time to do so, and ordinary details of life are not always that interesting. A range of factors influences what stories are selected and the picture of the world that is presented.

There is debate about how much the media influences public opinion. But in an era when the media, particularly television, is a key way in which we get to know about our society, there seems no doubt that it has an impact on perceptions and attitudes.

... [T]here is little evidence that the media hold great sway over public opinion in the direct sense, simply because people do not believe that journalists are telling the truth. The Australian public distrusts the media almost as much as it distrusts politicians ... Yet at another level the media do have enormous power: they largely determine what issues 'matter' by talking about or shunning them ... The media create the public domain, as the village square and the pulpit did in pre-industrial times ... In this role the media have a pervasive influence on how 'we', their public, conceive of ourselves and our place in the world.

Moira Rayner, Rooting Democracy: Growing the society we want, Allen & Unwin, NSW, 1997, pp.198–9

What is not clear is how far the media influences the way we see and understand issues. Community beliefs about crime are influenced by the media. But what gets reported by the media is influenced by trends in community attitudes and what the media thinks people will be interested in, or by what will sell newspapers or win ratings.

Discussion starter/activities

- What do you think the role of the media should be—to provide a range of ideas and question the way issues are debated, or to provide accurate but unquestioning coverage of an issue? You might split into groups of two or three and consider both sides of this question. After a few minutes share everyone's ideas in the group. Does the group have similar views or do people disagree? Why do you think this is so?
- Where do you get most of your information about crime, crime prevention and community safety?
- When you watch TV, listen to the radio or read newspapers, do you

generally believe what you see and hear? Or are you sceptical? Why?
Does it matter?

- Does it matter where information used by the media comes from?
Why/why not?
- While you are involved with the learning circle, you might find it useful to collect articles from newspapers and magazines that cover issues you are interested in. Bring them to your learning circle meetings and use them to supplement this kit. This will help make the kit and your discussions more relevant to you and up to date. As you read or discuss the articles, try to identify the views that are being expressed and those that are missing and what you think this means.

Wind-up

The last part of each learning circle session is an opportunity to reflect on what has been learned, evaluate how the session has gone, and allocate any tasks the group agrees need to be done before the next session. You could sum up your discussion under these headings.

Difficult points

- Are there any areas where you need more information? You might like to invite a guest speaker or find more information from an expert group or government department. Don't forget local libraries, community groups and the Internet.
- Summarise those areas where you have agreed to disagree. Minority views are valid.

Decisions

- Is there anything that the whole group has decided about your discussion?
- Is there anything you would like to do differently next time?
- Did you achieve what you had hoped?
- Is there any other action you want to take? This might include contacting your local council or politicians, sharing a meal, or watching a video.

Finally

- Remember to collect articles for your media file.