

# Song Notes and Lesson Ideas To accompany

## *Come Join the Circle: LessonSongs for Peacemaking*

by Paulette Meier

(Please note: This is a work in process! I welcome your feedback and ideas at any time! E-mail me at [paulette@lessonsongs.com](mailto:paulette@lessonsongs.com) or through my website at [www.lessonsongs.com](http://www.lessonsongs.com).)

### **Track #1 Come Join the Circle (Grades K-8)**

This song developed out of practice of using fun ways to get children's attention when it's time to transition from one activity to the other. In this case, I wanted everyone to come back from their respective groups and rejoin the large group, seated in a circle. A melody, even sung softly, seems to cut right through the din of voices and almost miraculously catches everyone's attention. So I began singing the direction "Come join the circle!" to the tune of "Wade in the Water"<sup>1</sup> \* and heads looked up, hands and mouths became still, and feet started moving towards the circle space! This became a theme song for our classroom sessions after that, and for many other programs I led in schools for years to come.

A circular seating structure is extremely important for building a classroom community. Many teachers start each morning off with students gathered in a circle, to review the plan for the day, to allow students to share personal news they might have on their mind, and /or to discuss classroom issues or business needing to be addressed.

In teaching conflict resolution in classrooms, the Children's Creative Response to Conflict program that I was trained in recommends having a circular seating arrangement as "home base" for the students as they process the activities they've done together. I like this practice, because it reinforces the message we want to convey about building a classroom community of inclusion and respect.

A practice that goes hand in hand with sitting in a circle is that of passing a "talking stick" to the person who will speak next. I have heard that this practice was used by many Native American tribes during important meetings. Everyone would be seated in a circle on the ground, and the one person who had the "talking stick" would get the full attention and respect of everyone else in the group. The circular structure facilitates good listening, because, as the

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<sup>1</sup> It is very important to tell the students the origins of the tune, "Wade in the Water." The song is a spiritual that is very significant in African American history. It was sung as a coded message by African slaves to inform runaway slaves to go into the river to avoid the dogs that the masters were sending out to hunt them down. Some say it was also used to alert slaves to the presence of Harriet Tubman and a plan to escape.

song says, “we all can see each other’s eyes.” Listening go-arounds or “round robins” as they are sometimes called, help students develop patience and skill in paying attention to peers while waiting for their turn to speak. Round robins can be used for sharing on any given topic. With primary grades it’s good to have students share by completing a sentence that you start. For instance: “Today, I feel \_\_\_\_.” Or “Over the holidays, I \_\_\_\_\_.” The structure can be used with older students as well, providing each person a chance to express his/her views on a given subject or to report on how projects went or how their weekend was spent.

Before listening to the “Come Join the Circle” song for the first time, you might want to ask “What do you think sitting in a circle might have to do with peacemaking?” After the students offer their ideas, ask them to listen to the song and see if any of their ideas are mentioned in the “counter melody” to the chorus. Explain what a counter melody is.

Other ideas for lessons include:

- Research the importance of the circle in various cultural traditions, including Native American, Celtic, and African.
- Learn about the legendary King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table, exploring the historic importance of the round table for King Arthur’s attempt to unite the warring forces in England.
- Write about how it feels to sit in a circle in class vs. sitting with all the desks facing forward.

## **Track #2 Listen! (Grades 1-8)**

When I ask children to define what it means to listen, they often respond with the answer: “What you do when you obey your teacher or parent.” This is very telling.... I guess they have heard so many admonishments from adults to “listen and do what you are told” that the two concepts have been merged in children’s minds!

In a peaceable classroom, students learn that everyone deserves to be listened to, including young people. Listening is all about giving and receiving attention. And attention is a powerful gift. I sometimes say “attention heals,” because if we have a problem or are having some hard feelings to deal with, simply getting some attention can help us feel better. Also, it’s good for teachers to remember that giving attention requires energy. If we think of it as a commodity, we could say that we only have so much to give before we need to get some back, in order to replenish our supply! Giving students frequent chances to engage each other in pairs can help replenish their attention so they have more available for their teacher as needed. This need not take any more than two minutes; through practice, students get use to quickly exchanging attention.

If we want students to be able listen well and to use opportunities for sharing in an optimal way, we will likely need to provide training. All conflict resolution programs include training in listening skills. A fun way to introduce it is to assign listening pairs and a topic to share about, decide who’s going to speak first, then direct the listeners to do everything they can NOT TO LISTEN. After about 30 seconds, stop. Report on what kinds of non-listening behaviors you or the students observed, and then switch and have the other partners get their turn NOT TO LISTEN. Again, report what behaviors were observed. This is a chance to explore

a little bit about different feelings and conflict management styles, too. Ask, "Who was so angry that you wanted to force the other person to look at you?" and "Who just felt like giving up and not trying to talk?" Then make a list of all the things the students would have LIKED their partner to do instead. Next, give everyone another chance to do it right this time. The list should include things like: good eye contact, facing the person, being quiet, head nodding now and then, not doing distracting things, and maybe paraphrasing or reflecting the speaker's feelings in words like: "It sounds like you enjoyed that." Or "You sound really pleased." You can close the lesson by playing the song and having students sing the refrain and chorus together.

The taking turns part of the skill of listening and speaking in a conversation is a very important skill for children to learn. Relationships tend to go a lot better when we do this! And it is essential in conflict resolution and mediation. Using strategies to focus and slow down the talking so people can really hear each other is part of conflict resolution work, and it's useful for classroom discussions as well. The Round Robin, with use of the talking stick, as described above, is one way. "Conversation Ball," a term I learned from the Peace Education Program in Louisville, Ky. is another. In a group discussion on a serious or even controversial topic, a ball is tossed to the speaker who wants to speak next, but before that person speaks, he/she must paraphrase what the person before him/her just said. This is a wonderful way to increase focus and ability to listen. One tip: instead of a rubber ball or tennis ball, use something like a hacky sack that won't bounce when someone misses.

Timed "pair shares" are also an essential structure in classrooms - each person in a pair gets the other person's full and undivided attention for a set period of time to share their thinking about a specified topic or about something they would like to get some attention for. Electronic timers come in handy for this. It's good to time the sharing, because it avoids the classic occurrence of one person easily using up most or all of the time while the other shares very little.

### **Track # 3 TIME at the Peace Table**

I wrote this song in the context of working with primary students at a rural school in Kentucky. We were using lessons from the curriculum, *Peacemaking Skills for Little Kids*, part of the PeaceWorks series published by the Peace Education Foundation in Florida. ([www.peaceeducation.com](http://www.peaceeducation.com)) Our goal was to have a "peace table" in every classroom where teachers could send the students to talk things out without needing to interrupt the classroom learning. We bought orange crates and had little blue "tablecloths" made with a wonderful graphic silk-screened on it of children holding the globe, their T-shirts each displaying a letter to spell out the words "Peace Table." I wanted some very simple steps that would make it easy for them to remember what to do when they went to the peace table, and came up with the acronym T.I.M.E. In the course of five lessons, we had taught them vocabulary words and concepts for "conflict," "escalation and de-escalation," "listening," recognizing angry feelings and ways to cool down, use of "I-messages" instead of "You-messages" when speaking up for oneself, and brainstorming creative "win-win solutions." We sang the song together as the culminating activity for the last few lessons. And later, we had a program for parents where the children got to perform skits and the songs we learned.

**The Peace Tablecloths and T.I.M.E. steps posters are available through Peace Education Program, Louisville, Ky. (502-589-6583)**

There are so many peacemaking skills curricula now that include all the concepts and skills I've mentioned here (see Recommended Resources on my website, [www.lessonsongs.com](http://www.lessonsongs.com)). Here are a few ideas that I've found particularly fun and workable for teaching the concept of conflict escalation. One primary teacher made some steps out of boxes to represent the concept of an "escalator." A child would stand at the bottom as she began to read or tell a very short story that involved participants in a conflict saying or doing things that resulted in conflict escalation. As soon as the child heard a "conflict escalator," he/she would take a step up to show recognition of the concept. When the top was reached, the other students in the class helped the child get back down the steps by giving ideas of what the characters in the story could do to de-escalate the conflict. Another way to demonstrate this comes from William Kreidler's book *Elementary Perspectives: Teaching Concepts of Peace and Conflict*. It involves drawing the escalator steps. I often use puppets for younger students to enact a conflict story. Then the story is analyzed together by drawing steps on flip chart paper or a blackboard to demonstrate the escalating action. Students can re-enact the same play or make up another one, with students at their tables drawing their own escalators, adding on another step each time someone escalates the conflict. Always conclude by having ideas for de-escalating and resolving the conflict peaceably.

For teaching the other concepts in the T.I.M.E. steps, see notes for the song "Listen" about listening skills, and the song "Dealing with Feelings" about "I-messages."

**Track # 7 Canned Peas Blues: (Grades 3-7)**

I wrote this song based on my own experience as a child of being forced to eat something I disliked so much that I often literally felt sick. I'm sure my mom had what she saw as my best interests at heart, and with five kids, it would have taken some planning to meet everyone's culinary preferences! The family meal was a routine event when I was growing up, and to make it easier my mom often rotated seven basic menus, so each night we knew what "supper time" would bring. Thus the reference to Wednesday nights...roast beef, mashed potatoes and peas (from a can) night!

Most people (adults and children both) identify with the experience of being forced to do something as a child that was hated and feeling powerless to change it. That experience of powerlessness, having no control over what adults do and decide for us, is pretty universal among children. We tend to internalize that feeling and then spend the rest of our lives struggling to undo it, and this struggle can take many forms and shapes. All parents deserve lots of support for figuring out how to balance a child's need to go after that which inherently motivates him/her with that child's needs for limits to be set and cooperation skills to be learned. If my mom had had a little more help as well as more information about how to avoid this power struggle we got into so frequently, perhaps the distress we both were feeling could have been averted!

This song can be used as a way to bring up these issues so children can have a chance to discuss them. We often teach kids how to handle conflicts with peers, but what about how to handle

relationships with adults? We leave them in the dark about that. They deserve some adult leadership, helping them think well about themselves in relationship to adults. This can and needs to be done in a way that maintains safety, where “prying” into family life is not what is happening.

Here are some examples of topics this song raises that could be addressed in creative writing and/or discussion with students:

- 1) Commonalities and differences among students in food likes and dislikes, meal time habits, and rules about eating at home. (Many cooperative learning structures lend themselves to exploring these topics. See Kagan, *Cooperative Learning*, a must for every classroom!)
- 2) Exploration of options the parent in the song could take to avoid power struggles and still get child’s needs for good nutrition met;
- 3) Exploration of options young people can take when they have a concern about how an adult is deciding things for them. Discuss the main character’s idea of getting support from her friends to meet with her mother. Ask: Do you think it might convince the mother to let the child eat something else, if her/his friends asked if they could talk with her together about it? What might happen? Is that realistic for kids to do that with an adult? Discuss the term: “Negotiate.”
4. An interesting science/health project: students identify a nutritious food they don’t like, and research other foods that might provide the same nutrients!

## **Track # 9 Clothes Don’t Make the Person (Grades 4-7)**

Clothing is a huge concern among so many young people. Before sharing this song, you might want to ask the students to talk about what kind of clothes they like and why they like them. You could also ask them where they think these likes and dislikes come from.

Much of the bullying that occurs in schools preys on young people’s fears of not fitting in or belonging. Unfortunately, these fears are fed by the relentless advertising in magazines and on TV that manipulate our children to think if they just had “these shoes” or “this pair of jeans” they would be accepted. Young people deserve chances to discuss and learn about the forces - including those of economic interests - that are shaping their lives and their fears; this song can provide a good opener.

There are two different issues addressed in the song: 1) self esteem/ popularity concerns, and 2) the cost and origin of the consumer goods which families and children invest in. They each deserve plenty of time for exploration.

In both verses, fear of ridicule for not wearing the “right” brand name clothing is at the heart of the struggle. This is a fairly common struggle, but one that often goes unaddressed in schools. I think it goes unaddressed in part because it relates to a subject that people often feel uncomfortable talking about with kids: economic class status. Economic class is a huge factor

in our society, but it is so much a part of the fabric of our lives, that it is not often discussed... or even noticed. There was a book I read years ago called *The Hidden Injuries of Class* that addressed this U.S. phenomenon. A more recent book, *Nickled and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich, provides insight, too, into the struggles of people who do so much of the common work of this society but are not paid decent wages. Their struggles go unnoticed by other more middle class sectors, and their stories are not generally the fare of sitcoms and TV series. It's easy to see how self esteem might suffer in a child whose family is penny pinching for survival, when they are surrounded by media images that hold out a certain lifestyle that is unattainable for them. And all the more so if there are plenty of other students at their school whose families do seem to be able to attain it.

The competitive nature of a capitalist economy can put a lot of pressure on kids in so many ways. They are pressured to achieve so they can get a good paying job, or even any decent job, when so many of the jobs their grandparents did like family farming, appliance repair, carpentry, factory work, etc. are no longer available. They are pressured to measure up by being slim or strong or dressed right so they can look more like the people they see on TV. It's easy for kids to not realize or to forget how much their world is shaped by T.V. shows and ads, whose sole purpose is to sell them something, not to help them grow into smart and caring citizens.

In exploring the topic of self esteem and popularity with students, we might first ask them to write their own reflections on the song, addressing questions like "What does it mean to be "popular?" and "Why do such things as brand name labels determine popularity?" and "What was the underlying message of Michelle's sister, and do you agree with it?" You can also use this as a segue into conflicts among the students at your school: "Does this song describe anything similar to the kind of conflicts we have at our school?" Writing things down first can help students get in touch with their own thoughts and feelings before waiting to hear what their peers say. Each verse of the song also lends itself to problem solving: "What, if anything, can Michelle do at school to be friends with any of the "popular girls" on her own terms?" "What could she do to help all the girls feel included?" And "What can Josh do if he decides not to spend any money he's saved to pay the difference between what his dad will buy and what he wants?" "How could he influence the other boys to stop teasing him?"

For the topic of who makes the consumer goods that we in the U.S. buy and use, and how fairly are they treated as workers, I recommend the teacher manual: *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*, by Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson. (Rethinking Schools Press). This book is loaded with facts, articles for students to read, and lesson plans for teachers. One obvious activity is to have students research the labels on their own clothing, finding out where and how they are made.

Once students learn about the dire working conditions in so many, many factories around the world where our clothing is being made, their inherent sense of morality often leads them to want to take on an action project. I recently heard of a group of students, who after learning about the conditions of Nike factories in some places, initiated their own boycott and took all their old Nike shoes and dumped them at Nike's doors. Helping students to understand the bigger global economy, their role in it as American consumers, and the processes by which corporate interests try to influence their likes and dislikes can serve to increase a sense of

“solidarity” with each other as young people, realizing that they can work together to change the things that cause them to fight or negatively compete against each other.

## **Track # 10 Martin and Robby: (Grades 1-5)**

By the time many boys reach first grade, they sadly already have learned not to cry or show vulnerability for fear of having their masculinity challenged. In the book, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, Kindlon and Thompson connect violence in boys with self protection against this kind of shame and hurt. And in *Real Boys*, author William Pollack asserts that many boys’ ability to feel empathy starts to diminish already in primary school. We live in a society where it seems to be more ok to show anger and toughness than to show fear and gentleness. The values of fierce competitiveness and violent approaches to problem solving have saturated our media, leaving values of positive communication, cooperation, and “emotional intelligence” more and more out of the picture. In yet another book, *Boys Will be Boys: Breaking the Link between Masculinity and Violence*, Dr. Myriam Miedzian also makes the case that physical aggression in boys is linked to the cutting off from emotions that happens to boys in response to their conditioning. And, while aggression in girls is on the rise too as a result of prevailing social values, boys, who have long been oppressed by attitudes that say “You ‘gotta be tough to be a man,” have much more at stake if they don’t measure up. Boys often live in the terror of being called or thought to be “gay” if they reveal their sensitivity or any feelings of hurt or fear. It’s also difficult for boys to have close, loving friendships with each other for the same reason. The extreme negative attitudes about homosexuality that exist make it highly risky for boys to show natural, gentle, human affection toward another boy. This is a huge challenge for adults - to take on the media, to take on these terribly repressive attitudes that make it so unsafe for children to express their feelings and have empathic, loving relationships.

I have used this song to introduce topics for discussion, e.g. “Is it ok for a girl to be like a boy? (Playing sports hard, etc.) What about for a boy to be “like a girl?” (A good opportunity to explore gender stereotypes.) “What kind of put downs do boys get when they cry?” “What can a boy say (to himself or to the other), if he gets “dissed” for crying?” And “Do you think it’s realistic that two boys could make a pledge to let it be ok with each other to cry?” Older students could do research on studies about the reasons for and benefits of crying and other forms of emotional release. Journaling is another good way to have students explore this for themselves. Additional topics might include: Writing about a time something painful happened and crying “helped to get the pain out,” or about memories and messages received from older siblings or adults about crying, or what you would like it to be like for all children when they get hurt. Another activity could be to do a brainstorming session on what could be done to make it safer for everyone to feel their feelings about being hurt. A “Conversation Ball” discussion on any of these topics would be useful; making sure the trust level is high enough to ensure emotional safety for those topics that encourage disclosure of personal memories and feelings.

Teachers might want to read the book *Tears and Tantrums: What to do when Babies and Children Cry* by Dr. Aletha Solter, which documents much research in human biology showing the essential role of emotional release in helping to work through trauma and stress. Apparently our human bodies were meant to release both physical and emotional hurt through physical

ways, such as crying and shaking, just as we see babies and children doing. If we bottle up the feelings that come from a hurtful experience, our thinking ability is literally compromised in future situations that remind us of that experience. When something in the present moment - a face, an action, a tone of voice, even a smell -- triggers that past, unprocessed trauma, we enter into varying degrees of "fight or flight" reaction and cannot think as clearly as we would have, had we released the emotions fully at the time of the hurtful experience. Solter describes the chemical make up of tears as comprised in large part of negative stress hormones. One study showed that more negative stress hormones are released in one hour of crying than in one hour of running!

Dr. Solter's book informs parents how to help their children release the feelings and how to be there for them in the process. Sending a child to their room to cry, or always putting a child in "time out" when they act out or tantrum can actually instill the idea that in their most stressful, difficult times, when they are filled with distress, they have to go it alone in dealing with extremely upsetting feelings. This can, in a sense, trigger a new hurt and set up a pattern of expecting abandonment and rejection when emotional need arises. This information is indeed challenging, in a society where the adults are so rushed and schools so understaffed, and where teachers are so pressed to focus on proficiency tests and feel they have no time to deal with a tantruming child.

## **Track # 12 Affirmations (Grades 1-6)**

I've used this song in conjunction with activities having to do with building a positive classroom community, where each child is recognized for their uniqueness. In *The Friendly Classroom for a Small Planet* (by Priscilla Prutzman et. al., produced by Children's Creative Response to Conflict), the authors stress that if we want students to apply the conflict resolution skills we teach, we must also work to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation and joy in learning. Students will say what the teacher wants to hear when questions about how to manage conflict come up, but the real motivation to work things out has to come from a deeper desire to belong to this caring community that has been created. The book is filled with suggested activities and games where children experience being the center of attention and sharing that place with all the other children.

Children love chances to be told what others appreciate about them. Affirmations that are very specific help children develop a clear picture of themselves and what exactly is appreciated. Creating opportunities for them to write or say specific positive things to and about each other, with the teacher modeling this often, will help create a more positive climate. I like sentence starters like: "I like the way you..." or "I appreciate your..." or "I notice that..." Circle games like "affirmation web" help the understanding go even deeper.... taking a ball of yarn, holding on to the string and rolling it to someone in the group to give an affirmation to, then that person does the same, and soon you have a web on the floor to look at. "When one student pulls on the web a bit, the rest of the pattern shifts... showing how we are all so interconnected. And what we say to one person in our class affects all of us in the class. We each have a role to play in making our class a positive, safe place to be."

I've found that holding open discussions about respect vs. put downs (also called "capping" or "dissing") is a good way to begin reducing negative comments. Invite students to think about their school, their families, TV, our culture in general... which behavior do we see more of, "dissing" or "affirming?" Which is more valued? Why? What does respecting other young people look like? With older students, you can help them explore such concepts as humor and TV network competition for viewers... why are shows with so much meanness so popular? These kind of discussions help build awareness, the first step towards changing behavior.

## **Track # 14 Come on Board! (Grades 4 up)**

This song provides a chance to do some important vocabulary building ("compassion," "healing", "liberation", "justice," "elder," etc.) as well some awareness building about different religions and ethnic backgrounds. There are endless learning activities that could be done in conjunction with this song. Have students identify the groups they belong to in the song (or if the group isn't mentioned, to add it, with maybe another verse written to encompass groups that weren't mentioned). Or if you're in a geographical region where the diversity is less obvious, do a "Stand Up If" activity, asking the students to "stand up if..... they know someone who is Jewish or Muslim, etc., of if they know someone whose ancestors were Native American or who came from Italy, Scotland, etc. Have them write or share stories about what they know about the different religious or ethnic groups.

It's important to point out that many people whose ancestors came from countries in Africa or whose ancestors were Native American do not know the specific country or tribe they are from. Explore this as another devastating effect of the oppression of racism, that people were driven from their homes, taken away from their families and forced to lose all ties with their people.

Once the vocabulary and different identity groups are understood, older students might explore which groups mentioned in the song might have some healing to do between them now or which groups might experience the burden of injustice as a people. Are there some groups that have more power (clout) than others in our society? Empathy and appreciation of differences can increase by looking at the school community and exploring: 1) which groups are in the majority or the minority; 2) what is it like to be in the minority; 3) what positive things come from exposure to differences.

Exploring similarities and differences between students is an important part of peace education. It's often surprising how little students may know about each other, even after years of being in the same class. Again, in the book, *Cooperative Learning*, Kagan offers great "learning structures" for students to get to know their commonalities and differences. Ask if the students think the closing statement to the song is true: that "We have lots of differences, but we've (got) lots more in common."