

# Creating a Peaceful Climate in Your Classroom & School Using Rituals: A Toolkit

Students learn best when their classrooms are places where they feel safe and connected, and where they are engaged and having fun. Establishing and practicing rituals in your classroom can help you create a peaceful environment and lay the foundation for your students to develop skills that will be useful to them in resolving conflicts peacefully throughout their lives.

## What are Rituals?

Rituals are actions, activities, or ceremonies repeated on a regular basis that have specific meaning or significance and that reinforce a desired behavior.

## How can rituals support a peaceful classroom climate?

Rituals can...

- Provide students with a sense of safety and community
- Provide structure and help set clear expectations
- Help students develop and practice the key peacemaking skills of communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, and civic engagement
- Create space for reflection

## What are the keys to using rituals effectively?

**Explain**—Make sure your students understand the meaning/significance of the rituals.

**Rehearse**—Practice the ritual with your students to get the language and actions just right.

**Reinforce**—Recognize and reinforce your students' positive actions. Always model appropriate behavior for your students.

**Be consistent**—Use the same language and routine each time you practice a ritual.

Rituals help your students know what to expect, which in turn helps them to feel calm, competent, and ready to learn. Use this toolkit to incorporate rituals into your classroom and school as a first step toward building a community of peacemakers.

## Five Types of Rituals

- 1. Opening Rituals**  
Meetings, greetings and sharing to set the right tone (page 2)
- 2. Closing Rituals**  
Appreciations are the way to end the day (page 5)
- 3. Activity Rituals**  
Promote peace all day long (page 7)
- 4. Classroom Management Rituals**  
Keep it quiet *without* yelling (page 9)
- 5. Schoolwide Rituals**  
Grow a tree and spread peacemaking (page 10)

# Using Opening Rituals to Have a Peaceful Day



An **opening ritual** sends a clear message to students that the day (or activity) has begun. The opening, or greeting, ritual also helps students make a peaceful transition from whatever they were doing at home, on the bus, or on the playground to what they will be doing in the classroom by creating a clear boundary between home and school or between lunchtime and lesson time.

A **Classroom Meeting** in the morning is an opening ritual that helps foster a peaceful climate in many classrooms and schools by providing a safe space for discussing both fun and challenging topics. This ritual provides instruction and practice in building community while giving students a chance to have fun, interact with one another, and get to know one another better.

Here is a suggested agenda for the daily classroom meeting:

**Greeting**—Give students the opportunity to greet and welcome each other, just as you welcome them.

**Sharing**—Allow students to share information about themselves, either by talking about their personal experiences or by displaying and describing a favorite item.

**State of the Community**—Provide an opportunity for discussion of any issues or concerns that need to be resolved or upcoming celebrations that need to be planned.

**Daily News and Updates**—Wrap up the meeting by providing a brief overview of the day's activities.

The classroom meeting is especially useful as a tool for fostering peace, connectedness, and community **throughout the school** if every classroom holds their meeting at the same time.

An opening ritual can be used at the beginning of a lesson as well as at the beginning of the day. **Stand Up, Sit Down** is a ritual that can be used before a lesson to gauge students' prior knowledge on any issue. For example, before beginning a lesson on subtraction, you might ask all the students who have practiced subtraction to stand up and all those who have not yet tried subtraction to stay seated. Stand Up, Sit Down can also be used to review materials presented the previous day.

## Learn more:

Visit our [Digital Activity Center \(DAC\)](#) at Teach Peace First for more information on these and other opening rituals.

Search our [database](#) for opening rituals to use in your class.

Tip # 1  
cont.



Using a **How Are You Feeling?** chart is another way to begin the day peacefully. Create a chart that depicts different emotions. At the beginning of the day (or at another designated time, such as after lunch or recess), ask each student to place a sticker or a sticky note with her name on it on the emotion that she is currently feeling. Use this ritual as a jumping-off point for discussing why students are feeling a certain way, how we can cope with our feelings, and how we can help each other when we see that our classmates are feeling sad or angry.

**Learn more:**

**How Are You Feeling?**

This activity is included in our [Grade 1 Curriculum](#) throughout the first semester. In Peacemaker Skills Lessons 3-10, this activity is explored, reinforced and expanded.

How Are You Feeling?				
Happy	Sad	Angry	Calm	Other

## Promoting Peace with Closing Rituals



Just as opening rituals send a message that the day (or activity) has begun, **closing rituals** send the message that the day (or activity) has come to an end and ease students' transitions to their next activity. Closing rituals provide an opportunity for your students to review, evaluate, and appreciate the work that they have done and that other students have contributed.

The **closing circle** is a helpful end-of-the-day ritual. The closing circle provides an opportunity for your class to review the day's activities, evaluate the work (both academic and social or emotional) that they have done, and offer appreciations for each other.

The following are some recommended activities for the closing circle:

**Pulse of Peace** (or **Pass the Squeeze**)— Have your students stand or sit in a circle holding hands and explain that they are going to pass a pulse of positive energy around the circle by squeezing their neighbors' hands in turn. Designate a student to start passing the squeeze to his right by *gently squeezing* the hand of the student next to him. When a student feels her hand being squeezed, she passes the squeeze on to the next person. Continue until the squeeze has made its way around the entire circle.

This game can be used at many points during the day. When you use it during the closing circle, you can incorporate a sense of reflection by having students close their eyes and visualize the energy flowing through the circle as they feel connected to their class and contemplate the completion of another day/activity.

### Learn more:

More information on these and other closing rituals can be found in the [Teach Peace First Digital Activity Center \(DAC\)](#).

#### Unfinished Sentences

This ritual helps students reflect on their learning through writing. Use unfinished-sentence prompts to guide students in this reflective writing ritual. Check out the [Grade 3 curriculum](#) on the DAC for sample prompts.

#### Closing Song

Songs can be effective closing rituals as well. The "I Am Special" song is helpful as a closing ritual after each lesson in the [Kindergarten Curriculum](#). The song signifies the end of the lesson and reinforces an important message—that each student is special.

## Tip # 2 cont.

**Debrief**—Use these three simple questions during your daily debriefing ritual to give your students the space to review and evaluate their learning:

**What?** Ask some questions that provide time and space for your students to think about **what** they learned and experienced (both academically and socially/emotionally) during the day. For example: *What happened today? How did it make you feel? What was hard today? What was easy?*

**So what?** Ask some questions that help your students think about **why** they played the game in the day's lesson. For example: *What did this game teach us? Why was it valuable to play this game? Why is it important to practice [teambuilding, communication, inclusion]?*

**Now what?** Close out the debrief with space for your students to reflect on how they can apply what they learned today outside school. For example: *How can we use what we learned today outside school? Are there skills we learned today that we can use to build peace on the playground, at home, or on the bus?*



**Appreciations**—This closing ritual is especially effective for reinforcing peacemaking skills with your students. Let students know that this is the time to express appreciation for each other for kindnesses shown and actions performed during the day. Especially at the beginning of the year, you may need to model appreciations to get the ball rolling. For example: “Tyonna, I appreciate your lending Maya a pencil when she didn’t have one earlier today.” Or, “Benjamin, I appreciate your including Marcus in your group when you noticed that he did not have a group to join.”

### Learn more:

#### Appreciation Circle

Appreciations can be expressed informally or within a specific structure like an Appreciation Circle. For more guidance on the Appreciation Circle, see the this activity in action in one of our [lessons](#).

# Peaceful Activities to Use Throughout the Day

Peaceful rituals don't have to be limited to the beginning or end of the day. Using various rituals throughout the school day will help bolster your students' peacemaking skills by promoting cooperation, encouraging relationship building, and allowing for student expression within the classroom. Using the same structure every time you want students to discuss or vote on a topic also helps to eliminate wasted time in the classroom.

A **Friendship Coin Jar** invites students to recognize and celebrate acts of friendship that they see throughout the school day. Students can celebrate such friendship acts as: sharing, including others, being kind, cooperating and complimenting each other. Label a large jar the "Friendship Coin Jar" and keep it in a visible place in the classroom. Keep cut-out circles of paper ("coins") close to the jar. When students see an act of friendship, they can write down what they saw on a coin and place it in the jar. Designate a certain time of day when a few coins are read aloud in order to publicly celebrate and acknowledge these acts of friendship.

**Concentric Circles** is a ritual in which all students are active participants, and it is especially effective at encouraging discussion among upper elementary and middle school students. Guide half of your students to stand in a small, tight circle facing outward, and have the other half stand in a larger circle outside the smaller circle. Each person should be facing a partner. Then, ask a question about a recent or upcoming lesson. Students should take turns answering the question with their partners; then you direct the circles to rotate so that students have new partners. Repeat several times with the same or different questions.

The **Continuum** ritual encourages students to think about their opinions on different issues and about how strongly these are held. With tape, create a line on the floor and establish that one end is where to stand if you "strongly agree" and the other end is where to stand if you "strongly disagree" with a statement that is read. Standing in the middle signifies neutrality. Read a statement aloud—for example, "I believe that bullying is a problem in our school"—and give students time to select where to stand along the continuum line according to their opinions. Ask students to explain why they are standing where they are. This ritual can be used whenever you want to have students assess and share their opinions.



## Learn more:

Check out the [Friendship Coin Jar](#) activity in a lesson plan on our [Digital Activity Center](#).

See [Concentric Circles](#) in action in a [Grade 3 Peacemaker Skills](#) lesson.

Find full directions for the [Continuum](#) activity (and other great rituals) in our [games/activities search engine](#).

# Classroom Management Rituals for a Peaceful Classroom



Due to the consistent structure they provide, rituals can be especially useful in managing a classroom peacefully and positively. This structure gives students a sense of stability and security, which in turn helps them to feel calm and competent in the classroom.

One effective classroom management ritual is the use of a **Quiet Signal**, which indicates to students when it is time to settle down, stop talking, and focus attention on the teacher. Your school may already have its own Quiet Signal. If not, choose a signal to use consistently in your classroom, and suggest establishing the use of a Quiet Signal for the whole school to the administration to facilitate management of schoolwide activities.

One commonly used Quiet Signal is a raised hand with two fingers extended upward. As soon as students notice you or a classmate using this signal, they immediately stop talking and give the Quiet Signal themselves. Soon more and more hands go up, the room becomes quieter and quieter, and the ritual has accomplished its purpose.

**Using a Quiet Signal can eliminate the ironic situation of a teacher yelling at a class to “Quiet down!”**

Have students participate in drawing up a **Classroom Contract** that outlines the **Rules and Expectations** for the class. In this beginning-of-the-year ritual, lead students through a brainstorming exercise about what kind of class or community they would like to be a part of:

*How would you like to be treated in this community?*

*What would make you feel safe?*

*Would you like to have your classmates listen when you are speaking?*

Guide your students to work together to develop their **Classroom Contract**. When it is finished, enlarge the contract to poster size and have all the students sign it. Referencing (or silently pointing to) the Classroom Contract periodically is a peaceful way to remind students of the classroom rules and expectations.

## More Quiet Signals to Try:

**Rhythmic Clap**  
Clap rhythmically and have your students repeat your clap.

**Lights Out**  
Turn out the lights in the classroom briefly.

**Call and Response**  
Call out a designated word or phrase and have your students respond—for example: “Peace” ... “Makers.”

**For more on the Classroom Contract...**  
Detailed information about developing a peaceable Classroom Contract, with specific suggestions for different age groups, is available in the Classroom Contract tipsheet on the Digital Activity Center (DAC).

# Schoolwide Rituals for a Peacemaking School

Having several rituals that are practiced schoolwide creates both a cohesive community with a shared culture of compassion and empathy for peers who are different and a student body skilled at working together to solve community problems peacefully. Here are some rituals that can help you build this community.

Hold monthly **Peacemaking Assemblies** where staff and student peacemakers are celebrated.

Create a **Peacemaker Tree**. Make a large brown cutout of a tree and post it on a bulletin board or in a hallway with large green leaves set within reach. Staff, students, and parents are invited to fill out leaves when they would like to show appreciation for members of the school community. It is important to make sure these are updated regularly.

Organize regular **Community Service Learning Days** for the entire school. Let students participate in the process of organizing the event, and encourage different grades to work together.

Hold individual **Classroom Meetings** at the same time every day and in roughly the same format throughout the school.

Hold a **Parent Appreciation Day**, a monthly family breakfast/potluck or other ritual that encourages family participation and gives students a chance to share their peacemaking work with their families.

Create rituals that foster **whole-school community building through cross-grade activities**. Examples include: having older children “buddy-up” with younger children to read to them at a designated time every week, and having cross-grade recess time in which the children in the older grades are responsible for organizing games for the younger children.



Find additional toolkits, lessons, activities and more at [Peace First's Digital Activity Center](#).