



## Switching Places in the Circle

This is how we begin most of our classes, and no matter which group of people we are working with, it seems to always work its magic. The group starts moving right away, with almost no directions. The exercise gets silly and playful easily and quickly, and it helps release the tension that exists when a group first comes into the circle. It's a great icebreaker for them and for you.

### Directions

Begin the class with everyone standing in a circle.

*Everyone change places in the circle, all at the same time.*

Do it yourself, and they will follow.

*Change places again. Keep going. Every time you see the circle start to take form, change places again.*

Talk over the group as they are changing and moving and laughing and talking.

*You can do this any way you want. You can cross right through the middle, or if you don't want to be in the crowd, go around the outside. You can move one step to the side, or you can stay where you are, and the circle will change around you. Wait until you see that the circle is almost formed again, and then change it. You can go fast, or you can go very slowly. You can go on the ground, or with a friend, or have a little interaction with someone as you go across.*

Watch the group and call out whatever directions they need to keep going and stay relaxed.

*If you are getting tired, go very, very slowly and see how that feels. Try being still in the middle and feel all the activity around you.*

If someone is doing something you haven't thought of, then call that out to the group as an option. This will affirm their freedom of choice and their creativity.

*You might want to try going across backwards like Gillian, or scooting across on the floor like Tom. Do a little dance in the middle like Sarah and Rosie if you want. Add sound like Kathleen is doing. Sounds are always good. They help your body get warm.*

Do this until the group is ready to transition into the next exercise.



## Teaching Tips

- ♥ Teach this one by doing it yourself. Use your own big energy to get the group going. Start by doing simple crossings so that they get the idea, and then add in some fun variations. They will catch on quickly.
- ♥ Right at the start, be sure to give the group lots of “safe” options, like going around the outside or standing still, so that they don’t feel any pressure to be more athletic or more outgoing than they feel in that moment.
- ♥ If people are struggling with the exercise or hesitating, sometimes more specific directions will get them going.  
*Try crossing the circle being as big as you possibly can. Be huge. Make huge sounds. Now try sneaking across the circle. How invisible can you be? What does your body need to do to get very small and not be seen? Sneak around each other as if you are really hidden. How little can you get? Now get really big again, noisy and obvious.*
- ♥ We usually use this first and then follow with some form of learning names. The Name Circle (page 12) works well and the two together are a good combination to help people relax and feel safe.
- ♥ In a nursing home where the whole group is unable to move to different places easily, we sometimes do this as a group for them, running around them and in front of them and behind them. The fun is contagious, and they love to watch. It helps them relax and get the idea of who we are. If your group is too small to do this, simply begin with the Name Circle.

## The Essence

The beginning is such a crucial point in the class, as most people make up their minds very quickly about whether or not a class is a safe place to be. If they get a confused signal at the start, it is very difficult to change their perception. This exercise mixes up the participants and their energies in the room right at the beginning, and it is an easy way to establish a spirit of playfulness. They don’t get a chance to get fixed in one place or to start making up stories about the right way to do things. Everybody can do anything they want, from standing still to leaping across the circle. Because everybody is in motion at the same time, the dimension of being aware of each other in the space is brought in right from the start. We often see participants reach out to give an elder a little extra support so they can cross through the middle or scoop up a child on their back for a free ride.

**Story** It is inspiring to experience how quickly the people in the group will reach out to each other if they are not feeling worried or afraid. Play seems to encourage a



generous and accepting response in all of us. However, if safe play hasn't really ever been a part of your life, you might view the whole thing differently. We were working in a homeless shelter in Iowa where the children were put in competition with each other a lot as a method to control their behavior. Some of the kids were very developmentally delayed, some were physically challenged, and others were quick-minded but struggling emotionally. We heard them as we came in, challenging each other around who would get to stay in the room with us, who was going to look stupid, who was going to "fall on their face," etc. We began by having them switch places in the circle very slowly, and then let the exercise evolve into them having a lot of choice about how they crossed or if they crossed. We just kept affirming everybody's choices as exactly right and pointing out that they were making a more interesting dance together because they were all doing different things. They all seemed a little uneasy, and then one of the older boys suddenly stopped moving, looked over at us with a challenging expression on his face and said, "I get what you guys are trying to do. You're trying to make it so nobody can win no matter what they do. I'm quitting." The affirmations were too much for them. The environment they had to function in did not encourage or value individual expression, and they didn't feel safe. We backed up and began with having them copy movements that we did, so they could feel more contained and be able to "do it right." Then we moved them into the Movement Score (page 103), a tightly structured exercise which does not involve constantly changing group dynamics, but does require some teamwork. They did much better with these structures that more accurately reflected their lives and their readiness.

Acknowledgement: We pulled this exercise from a piece we choreographed in 1991. It was so much fun to rehearse it that we incorporated it into our classes.