

LIFE SKILLS

pupils' suggestions for curriculum in this subject



CHANGEFACTORY KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

Why knowledge directly from children?

Children and young people have to feel that the school, kindergarten, support services, police and legal system are safe and useful for them. Children and young people all over Norway have experiences from meeting these systems and advice on how they can be the best possible. Authorities, professionals and students often lack this knowledge from children and young people, when frameworks and what constitutes good practice are to be determined, nationally and locally. Therefore, it must be brought in to a much greater extent and, together with other knowledge, be part of the knowledge base, in order to develop and ensure the quality of good systems for children and young people.

More than 10 years of collecting knowledge

For more than 10 years, Changefactory (CF) has systematically collected experiences and advice from children and young people about how they experience school, kindergarten, support services, the police and the legal system. In 2017, the Prime Minister opened Changefactory Knowledge Centre, to collect knowledge from children and young people about the public systems. As far as we know, there are few knowledge centres in Europe whose main purpose is to gather and disseminate knowledge directly from children and young people about the systems they are in. CF seeks collaboration with similar organisations.

Participatory and practice-oriented method

In order to collect, systematise and disseminate summarised experiences and advice from children and young people, a participatory and practice-oriented method is used. CF has called it the Changemethod. The Changemethod has been developed in close collaboration with children and young people. It greatly considers that children have the right to express their opinion, in ways that feel safe for them. The method consists of process descriptions and tools that help many diverse children and young people to participate. It's based closely on a participatory method used in action research, called Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

Safety is most important

The experiences and advice are collected directly from children and young people in sessions or interviews. The sessions are organised with an emphasis on ensuring that they are experienced as safely as possible for the children and young people who participate. The adults who facilitate are, among other things, trained by children to meet children and young people with openness and human warmth. This is based on the main findings from children about what adults have to be like, in order for children to be able to tell honestly.

Experiences and advice are summarised

Experiences and advice from the sessions are documented in transcripts and other written and visual documentation. The data is summarised and systematised. No links are made to theory. Experiences and advice that are repeated by many children and young people in many places in the country, become the main answers. We call this knowledge directly from children.

Children and young people present

The knowledge from children is presented in reports, films, podcasts, books and online. Participants in the qualitative surveys can also be invited, as pros, in communication and professional development. The pros present knowledge directly from children to politicians, national authorities, professionals and students.



LIFE needs to be on the timetable

Dear all adults. We are pupils from schools across Norway. Some of us enjoy school, some don't. Nevertheless, we have many of the same answers for what's good and what should be different in school.

One of the advice from us is that pupils have to be given the opportunity to talk more with each other, about how school and life feels. About how it can feel safe to be in the classroom, what we can do if someone is hurting during breaks, how we can comfort friends in good ways, how pupils can help each other if their parents are getting divorced. Many of us don't know what it feels like to be an outsider or what it feels like when someone in the family is sick or dies.

We have to talk about all of this so that the classroom can feel safe for everyone, so that as many as possible can thrive at school and so that as many children as possible can learn in the best way possible.

"The nice thing about the class LIFE SKILLS is that everyone gets to speak and is heard equally. You get to know the other pupils better, you become more natural and you can be more yourself."

"You can get out things you've kept inside. If you don't, you get a knot in your tummy or throat. It's hard to stay focused with that knot."

"It's good to get it out. If you don't cry, you'll be in pain for a very long time. It isn't dangerous to cry. It's bad if the teacher doesn't want to talk about it, because those who have experienced something bad need to talk about it to feel better."

We simply need an hour a week where we talk about LIFE. That's why this booklet exists. It's made for adults and is based on the experiences and advice of many children. You can use it when you need help to lead the class LIFE SKILLS. We need LIFE on the timetable.

Sincerely, School Pros in Changefactory

LIFE - a main piece of advice from qualitative surveys

From 2013 to 2018, the Changefactory conducted several qualitative surveys in schools. About 5,000 pupils from all of the counties in Norway took part in these qualitative surveys.

The pupils were asked how they experience Norwegian schools today and what advice they have about how schools can become even better. What makes them learn well? What have they found useful? What do they think needs to be done so that even more pupils can learn better? And what will it take for more pupils to thrive better? What would Norwegian schools have looked like if the pupils were allowed to decide more? What is your most important advice for an even better school?

A main piece of advice from the qualitative surveys is that in order for the school to be a place where as many pupils as possible learn and thrive, we have to listen to those who feel what school is like first hand every day. They have many important experiences and solutions for how schools can be better. One of the solutions is the class LIFE SKILLS. This class is a concrete suggestion from pupils on how to work with life skills in school.



Why put LIFE SKILLS on the timetable?

The class LIFE SKILLS is a concrete suggestion from pupils in Norway, on how to ensure that pupils feel safe, thrive and learn in the classroom and in school.

More young people worry

The youth data survey from 2017 shows an increase of children who feel bad feelings. Pupils in upper secondary school say that they "worry a lot" and that "everything is a struggle". 28 percent felt sad, unhappy and depressed. Bullying numbers have not decreased enough, despite many initiatives. The use of violence in schools is increasing.

Part of Public Health and Life Skills

Public health and Life skills will in 2020 be one of three interdisciplinary themes to enter Norwegian schools. This happens when the Vocational Reform comes into effect. Life skills and mental health have to be included in the curriculums in primary and secondary school and in upper secondary school. According to the Directorate of Education, the aim is: "To promote good mental health, give children and young people opportunities to make good and responsible life choices, and teach them to handle personal and practical challenges in the best possible way".

Politicians have listened to children's knowledge and the following is stated in Stortingsmelding 28 Inst. 19 S (2016–2017): "The Storting asks the government to consider setting aside time in the timetable to work with topics like class environment, pupil participation, work on attitudes and life skills, and to get back to the Storting on this in a suitable manner. The Storting assumes that the government collects assessments and views from the sector in this work".

This tool, the class LIFE SKILLS, is based on the main advice from pupils on how the interdisciplinary topic of life skills can be carried out in a way that feels safe and useful for the pupils. As so many pupils have said: "Life skills can't become another thing we have to be evaluated in".

About testing the class LIFE SKILLS

In 2017-18, 11 schools tried out tools, based on knowledge from children. The class LIFE SKILLS was one of these tools. Among other things, schools gave the following feedback:

- ♥ Pupils say it becomes safer in class
- ♥ Pupils say they understand each other better
- ♥ Pupils say more of them dare to present and speak in class
- ♥ Pupils say they get to know each other better and that new friendships are made
- ♥ Pupils say they sort out old conflicts more easily
- ♥ Adults say there's less to sort out after break
- ♥ Adults say the class LIFE SKILLS gives hope in locked situations

Several of the schools wanted an even clearer "recipe" for how the class LIFE SKILLS should be conducted. This booklet describes a tested and extended version.

What is the class LIFE SKILLS?

The main advice from pupils across Norway was that the class LIFE SKILLS is a conversational class, about topics that the pupils find important. The pupils learn about and from each other - and they gain new knowledge. They get to practise putting words to emotions, talking about emotions and getting to know themselves and others better. Pupils can understand that they aren't alone and that others can feel the same way they do. At the same time, they can learn and understand that others can feel completely differently. When children learn to use words to describe how they feel, they can more easily be understood and get help. When children hear how others feel, they can become more understanding and meet each other with more openness and inclusion.

By creating safe groups and classes, both pupils and teachers will thrive better. The pupils firmly answer that this also will lead to better learning. Maybe the class LIFE SKILLS can seem challenging and time-consuming for some adults. The pupils' answer is that the class LIFE SKILLS can help to save time. More safety and understanding between pupils can provide more space for learning. Teachers who have used the class LIFE SKILLS say that setting aside an hour a week for the class LIFE SKILLS saves time.

Short recipe for the class LIFE SKILLS

Led by a safe adult

The class LIFE SKILLS has to be led by an adult who the pupils feel safe with. It can be the homeroom teacher or another teacher, a school social worker, a social pedagogue or someone from the management. If someone other than the homeroom teacher leads the class LIFE SKILLS, it is advisable that the homeroom teacher is present, at least for many of the classes. The things being talked about in the class LIFE SKILLS can also become a topic in other lessons.

Sit in a circle

To make it as safe as possible, all of the pupils have to be able to see each other. Sitting in a circle is an easy way to achieve this. It may be a good idea to explain to the pupils why they're going to sit in a circle. Everyone can speak in turn going around the circle. For some pupils, the circle may feel unsafe and it may be a good idea to talk about how the circle feels.

Everyone is involved

It's wise to work to ensure that all of the pupils participate from the start, even if some may find it unfamiliar in the beginning. Warm up in the circle is a round where everyone, for example, says something they like or appreciate. Remember to make the theme something that doesn't create competition between the pupils. Everyone in the room where the class LIFE SKILLS is taking place have to join in. There shouldn't be any spectators during the class LIFE SKILLS.

Agree on a theme

The class LIFE SKILLS should be about things the pupils want to talk about. The pupils are invited to suggest topics. Next, the adult has to choose a way to decide the topic. It's a good idea to start with some topics that many of the pupils think are important to talk about. If the pupils don't have any suggestions, the adult can decide the very first topics.

Include everyone

The adult leading the conversation has to continually include everyone, in the most natural way possible. By going around the circle, everyone is invited to say something. The pupils are allowed to say "pass". The adult has to be able to accept this naturally, and for instance reply: "It's good that you're speaking up". The pupils are used to being assessed. In the class LIFE SKILLS, pupils shouldn't be measured in anything. The class LIFE SKILLS shouldn't be yet another thing you need to be good at.

Stop what makes it unsafe

The adult leading the conversation is responsible for making it feel safe. Comments, laughter or other forms of joking around has to be stopped, in a warm and non-judgmental way. The adult can say: "I'm sure you don't mean anything bad, but when someone laughs, whispers or comments, I can start to feel unsafe. So I'm asking you to stop that, is that all right?" The adult can also add: "You're all important in this conversation, that's why I'm saying this."

Safe ending

The class LIFE SKILLS can initiate thoughts and touch emotions. It may therefore be a good idea to have some time at the end to talk about something nice or do something to bring out smiles. When the pupils have become used to the class LIFE SKILLS, they can help to find good ways to end it.



Basic principles for the class LIFE SKILLS

As leader of the class LIFE SKILLS, it's important to focus on how all pupils can feel safe. At the beginning, it's extra important that the adult clearly explains what's going to happen and how the pupils can be good listeners and supporters for each other.

Say what's needed for safety

The pupils themselves can say what they need for the circle to feel safe. It could be not laughing at each other, not whispering while someone is talking, listening carefully to each other, explaining why if someone leaves or explaining why if someone reacts in an unexpected way. It's important that this is discussed thoroughly. These shouldn't be rules that have to be followed because an adult has decided so, but because it needs to be as safe as possible for everyone.

Practice listening well

Both adults and pupils may need to practise to become good listeners. Leading the class LIFE SKILLS can be an unfamiliar role for adults, because here they also have to listen and to a large degree learn from the pupils - and not really teach. The adult and the pupils should talk together about what that might mean.

Both adults and pupils can practise having a warm look and an engaged and warm body language. Feeling unsafe can be shown in different ways. Everyone has to meet each other with humility, solutions and preferably with new chances as well. Achieving safety for everyone in the circle can take time, but it's important that the class practices until it feels safe for everyone. It is fundamental in the class LIFE SKILLS that everyone feels as welcome as possible.

Talk about what needs to stay in the circle

Fear of what could be shared with others can be a reason why some people hesitate sharing something important to them in the circle. This is a wise thing to talk about. The adult has to help children understand how they can take care of what is told in the class LIFE SKILLS in a good way. It's important that pupils understand what can happen when something is shared and how painful it can feel for the person who experiences it.

In the class LIFE SKILLS, you can share things that you don't want to be shared outside the circle. But it's important that this doesn't end up creating new, closed rooms. The teacher should therefore talk to the pupils before and along the way about what can be shared. A rule for the class LIFE SKILLS, could be that you can tell others about the topic and what you yourself have shared, but not what others have shared. It's fundamental to talk about this, so that it will be safe to share in class. Experience from testing the class LIFE SKILLS so far is that this goes well if pupils and adults have had a good talk beforehand.

"Many adults are afraid that things may come up in the circle that can be used against vulnerable pupils afterwards. I have never experienced this! The rules are that what is said in the circle, stays in the circle... I feel that we're all a team in the circle where we sit and are vulnerable, honest and safe together. Here, no one is the best, no one is the worst, and here we stand together about sharing. No one stabs their team in the back." Teacher, Bergen.

Leading the class LIFE SKILLS

The class LIFE SKILLS has to be led by an adult who can make it safe for the pupils to talk about important and difficult things. They have to be someone who can talk to the pupils with warmth, a twinkle in their eye, commitment, a good mood and at the same time with enough seriousness. And not least, they have to be someone who can listen well and ask in-depth questions.

This can be the homeroom teacher or another adult at school. If someone other than the homeroom teacher is going to lead the class LIFE SKILLS, it might be wise for the homeroom teacher to participate in all or most of the talks.

The class LIFE SKILLS is a good opportunity for the adults to get to know the pupils. Therefore, it may be good for the school environment that more adults try out and practise leading the class LIFE SKILLS. They should be given time to familiarise themselves with how it can be done and have someone to go to for support and advice along the way. These may be adults many children trust. Pupils can also give the teachers advice about how to lead for it to feel safe for as many pupils as possible.

An engaged and safe adult

Some pupils will contribute a lot in the circle, but others need to be convinced that they should dare or bother to contribute. Maybe they have bad experiences with pupils in class or in school - maybe they have bad experiences with adults. Why should they then take the chance to tell? In order to bring and include everyone in the class in the conversation, the adult needs to have some basic characteristics.

Summarised experiences from pupils say that they can quickly tell when the adult thinks it's exciting, fun and important to be with them. Many can also notice when the adult doesn't judge, but is genuinely wondering what the pupils think and feel.

An adult who really listens with their heart is needed to lead the class LIFE SKILLS. They also have to be able to ask in-depth questions, based on what the pupils say. They have to take what the pupils say seriously.

Share something from oneself

The adult who leads the class LIFE SKILLS becomes a role model. To make it easier for the pupils to share, the adult can share something from their life. It can be experiences, thoughts or feelings. It's nice when the adults tell the pupils about something that means a lot to them - and what engages them. Adults may be afraid to share too much of their lives and take up too much space. But few pupils have answered that they've met adults who've shared too much from their lives. Pupils also say that when adults share something difficult from their lives, they give hope, because they show pupils that things went well for them.

If it feels unsafe in the circle, the adult can make it safe again by sharing honest words about what's happening in the circle. It needs to be done with a lot of warmth, and as far as possible without accusation.

Honest when something hurts

If the adult is sad, irritated or similar, many pupils can notice it. If the adult doesn't explain anything about those feelings, it can become unsafe for the pupils. Children can take honest feelings and truth better than wondering if something is wrong. It's also important that the adult is clear that the adult is responsible for their own feelings. The children can't take responsibility for the adult. Even so, many children ask, to a much greater extent than they are allowed today, to get to help when adults are having a hard time. Examples of what the adult can say:

"I want to share with you that I'm a little sad today because ... and I may have a little shorter fuse or seem a bit more distant, but it's not about you."

"I'm going through a divorce and I'm a little sad at the moment. I'll be fine, but I want you to know when I'm a bit different than I usually am. Of course, you have no responsibility for this, if you have a hug to spare, I can accept it."

Sentences like these are a good idea for the pupils to get, so they understand what's happening with the adult and it can make it safer in the room. The adult then becomes both a good role model and the pupils have the opportunity to show the teacher care and empathy.



Acknowledge, but don't praise

When a pupil has told something in the circle, the adult has to acknowledge what the pupil has said. This can be done by showing that they're engaged with a smile, kind words, encouraging looks, friendly hand gestures or other positive forms of body language. The adult can say thank you, reply with a strengthening comment or, if necessary, agree to talk more with the pupil after the class.

It is fundamentally important that the adult never "evaluates the worth" of what the pupils share. Pupils can be very sensitive to whether what they say is liked by the teacher, or not. It can become like a competition where it's all about getting the most praise and approval, and then the road to someone feeling unsuccessful or overlooked can be short. It is therefore important not to praise the pupils, but to emphasise that their contributions are valuable. This can be done by saying:

- ♥ Thank you for sharing
- ♥ Thank you, I'm sure more people can relate to that
- ♥ If we listen carefully, we can hear that many people think quite alike
- ♥ Thank you, we can hear that you think a little differently and that's good
- ♥ Lovely, and I hear that what you say is important to you

Lead the conversation safely

Pupils can quickly get used to listening and talking in a circle. The adult has to lead the conversation and stop if, for instance, whispering or giggling makes it unsafe. The adult invites to go around the circle and everyone is encouraged to say something. Taking turns to speak can also be done, but the aim is that EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. And experience says that this mostly happens by going around the circle in turns.

The adult has to be able to assess when it's appropriate to ask follow-up questions. Sometimes the turns around the circle can be quick, because time is short or because the pupils have to be able to sit still. At other times, it may be necessary to go into depth on the topic. Especially with pupils who are quiet, cautious or shy, good follow-up questions can be decisive. The conversation has to be led in safe, warm and engaging ways, so the pupils can look forward to the next time.

Practice and get feedback

Leading the class LIFE SKILLS can be challenging. As an adult, you can become insecure along the way. For it to feel safe for the pupils in the circle, it has to feel safe for the adults. It can be unfamiliar to talk about feelings and about how school feels for both pupils and adults. The adult can ask for help, from other adults or from the pupils. Leading the circle needs to be practised. The adult has to dare to try out different things - and also be able to make mistakes, and then try again. One option is to ask an adult you trust to join the class. This has to be someone the pupils in the class also feel safe with. Daring to invite someone in can give much.

Teachers may experience being uncertain about how to conduct the class LIFE SKILLS. Traditionally, teacher education programmes have perhaps not had enough of this and teachers therefore have little experience with this kind of class. It may be a good idea to arrange for the adults to practise together. One possibility is to have the class LIFE SKILLS in the teachers' planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time or on a planning day. Some of the adults can take turns leading, with the rest of the adults participating. Everyone then gets to experience how sharing and receiving can be experienced. Those who lead get to practise not evaluating what others share, but openly accepting and thanking them for sharing. And not least, they get to practise asking good follow-up questions.

View of children and values

Experiences and advice collected from several thousand children across the country over the past decade have been summarised in the surveys into a view of children and some values. Children ask that all adults who work with children are trained to meet them with these. Many pupils in schools have expressed that they quickly know how the adults view them and meet them and this is crucial for learning, safety and thriving in the classroom. For children to experience the adults as professionals in a good way, the school management has to set aside time for the adults to practise common child views and values.

View of children

Children and young people have a lot of knowledge about their lives and are just as valuable as adults. They do the best they can, based on how they're doing. They need love, they need to be believed in and taken seriously.

Children have suggested these four values as the most important

Openness

Here, openness is about how the adults at school share about themselves and their lives. This is important so that as many of the pupils as possible can feel safe with the adults and then can talk about themselves more easily. The adults are honest about what will happen at school. They're also honest and direct with each pupil about what they think are the pupil's strengths and challenges - and about the adults' opportunities to help. Honesty and love are connected, even bad news has to be given with a lot of warmth and kindness. If an adult thinks about telling parents or other professionals something a pupil has said or done, this can never be done without the adult first talking to the pupil about this and making an agreement about how it can be done.

Collaboration

Here, collaboration is about how the adults at school consciously collaborate closely with their pupils. They know that each of the pupils has a lot of knowledge about how they can learn and thrive. The adults invite pupils to talk about things that are important for the pupils. They understand the importance of making it safe enough for pupils to dare to tell what's important. The pupils get real responsibility and influence when the adults dare to include them in decisions. The pupils have a say in deciding working methods and topics they think are important to learn about and how adults and pupils can give feedback to each other in good ways.

Love

Here, love is about how the adults meet the pupils with human warmth, through friendly and warm body language, warm eyes and with a tone of voice and words that are perceived as safe. A main piece of advice from pupils is that if adults have a lot of warmth "at their core", being firm and setting boundaries will feel more safe and effective. Not all children experience enough human warmth at home. Schools can contribute here. The adults show that they can tolerate the pupils even when they're uncertain, scared or sad and show this through restlessness, rudeness or anger. A main piece of advice from pupils, is that the wisest way to stop what is often called bad behaviour, is with love.

Humility

Here, humility is about how the adults listen both with their heart and head, and with depth in order to understand the pupils. When pupils open up about something bad, they need adults to react naturally, with honest words about how the pupil shouldn't have experienced this or felt that way - or with tears. Natural reactions can help the pupil understand that they have experienced something very wrong and that they are now being taken very seriously. Being humble towards children also means being able to admit it when you, as an adult, have said or done something wrong. It can contribute to a lot of safety within the pupil and regain respect for the adult. Humble adults can both thank children and apologise to children.



Content and themes

The theme for the class LIFE SKILLS can be decided by the class, individual pupils, the teacher or in a collaboration. It can be about something from the classroom, breaks, social media, the local community, the media or the news. The pupils have to have the most important voices in deciding the theme for the class LIFE SKILLS.

The class LIFE SKILLS has to happen at a fixed or planned time. It may be a good idea to tell the pupils what the topic will be early in the day, so that they can think about what's important for them to talk about, related to the topic. Even if a topic can be perceived as simple and harmless for the adults, some of the pupils may find it unfamiliar or unsafe to talk about.

Examples of themes

Feelings

Joy, sadness, excitement, jealousy, envy, falling in love, being scared, loneliness, hatred, fear, nervousness, loss, anticipation, closeness, irritation, restlessness, shyness, anger, insecurity, the list can be extended a lot more than this.

Life events

Bullying and exclusion, unsafe looks and laughter, moving, changing schools, divorce, new adults in life, illness, birthdays, new siblings, funerals, loss of friendship, loss of pets, the list can be extended a lot more than this.

Important questions

How to make friends, what is a good friend, how to resolve an argument, how to include others, how to deal with pressure, how to deal with social media, how it feels to grow up with little money, how to say no and what you can say no to, how to listen to other people's no, what creates trust and safety, food and thoughts around food, relationship with one's body.

Courage and bravery

What is being brave at school, what is being brave in front of friends, can boys cry, is it different for boys than for girls, the courage to show different emotions, the courage to dare to talk about feelings.

Important information for children

What is the Child Protection System and what can they help with?
What is mental health care and what can they help with?
About gender, sexuality and equality
What is consent and when has a young person not consented
What no one is allowed to do to children and young people

Get to know each other properly

The importance of getting to know each other

In classrooms all over Norway, pupils say that even after several years in the same class, there are many in the class they don't know or barely know. It can be unsafe or scary to answer questions or present something, in groups or classes where not everyone knows each other. It can also make it difficult to find someone to talk to during breaks.

An important task for the adults at school is therefore to make it possible for the pupils to get to know each other. When they know each other, it becomes easier to feel safe and welcome at school. It becomes easier to share, to be yourself and to make mistakes. Masks can fall and roles can disappear.

It's also important for the pupils to get to know the adults, and the adults to get to know the pupils. It's nice to know a little about whether the adults have children, whether they have pets, what they care about and what they like to do. When the pupils know a little about the adults, they become more whole people for them and it can become safer for the pupils to talk in the classroom and to share things. Getting to know each other properly isn't something that ends - it has to be worked on throughout the school year.

Safe beginnings

The class LIFE SKILLS should take place in a circle, where all the pupils see each other and talk in turn. This is a main piece of advice from the qualitative surveys and also from testing in different classrooms. No one sits behind anyone, everyone can see everyone, and it becomes safer. It's usually a good idea to start the class LIFE SKILLS with an "easy" round in the circle, where everyone shares something about themselves, something they're involved in, something they like, favourite food or something they like to do, etc. Remember to not ask about things that can create envy or competition, like: "What did you do during the weekend?". Instead, ask about something nice from the weekend. Going around the circle like this regularly can become a good routine that creates positive expectations and provides safety and a sense of community. When everyone has heard their own voice out loud, early in the class, it becomes easier to participate further in the conversation and easier to avoid restlessness and uncertainty.

Safe endings

It may be a good idea to set aside some time at the end for something fun or nice, so the pupils can leave the class LIFE SKILLS with good feelings. But it may be important to check with the pupils whether this is appropriate. If feelings or memories and things that are painful have come up, the focus at the end shouldn't necessarily be on something fun. But in any case, the end needs to give the pupils strength.

Crying and sadness can be contagious. Therefore it's advisable for the adult to have a little plan for how the pupils can recover. If many are crying, the adult could say that now many need to be comforted and perhaps we need a while for comforting each other? Those who aren't crying can help comfort those who are.

Something fun or nice at the end could be:

- ♥ A little game that creates smiles and/or energy
- ♥ Class hug (everyone gets a hug from everyone)
- ♥ Squeeze snake (stand in a circle, close your eyes, hold hands, send a squeeze via your hands)
- ♥ Chinese Whispers
- ♥ A good warm song
- ♥ Go around the circle and say something that was good/instructive

At the end, the adult can ask if anyone wants to chat for a bit after the class. Children may have thoughts and feelings that it would be nice and necessary to talk about further. This can be checked with the pupils at the end. There may also be something that has come up, that adults need to address further. In that case, it may be safest for the adult to make an agreement directly with the person or persons involved.

When the circle gets difficult

When the circle becomes difficult, there can be many reasons. The pupils are different and have different experiences. Some of them may have challenges in relation to each other from school or from life outside school. Whatever the cause of the difficulties, it's always the adult's responsibility to address it and try to resolve it. As an adult, it's also wise to think that there may be something you can do differently, to better protect and support the pupils. Here are some tips on how you, as an adult, can think when the circle becomes difficult.

Looks, laughter, body language and whispers

The teacher puts words to their own feelings

Pupils may have bad habits where they whisper or give each other mean looks. Some people may have a body language when they're insecure that makes others laugh. If looks are sent around the circle or someone laughs or is agitated while someone else is talking, it can quickly become very unsafe. The adult then has to,



in a nice and warm way, stop for a bit and pause the room. With a warm voice and without wanting to accuse anyone, the adult can say that they feel a little uneasy or insecure in the circle now and can ask what it's about. The adult can for instance say: "I feel that it's becoming unsafe here now, can you tell me what's happening?" or "I don't think anyone wants anything bad, but I think it's a little uncomfortable when someone whispers."

When the adult uses "I-language" and tells what noise and whispering does to them, it can be easier for pupils to understand how it can feel to others, and it can help them put into words how things feel for themselves. When this is put into words, many pupils become more focused. If the pupils know that if someone starts laughing, this will be stopped, the pupils become both safer and braver. There may then be more people who dare to share more than they usually do.

When someone doesn't want to talk

It's wise to think about who gets to talk first when going around the circle. It can be decisive for who and how the others open up.

When pupils don't want to talk in the circle, it may be that they don't dare to open up to the others. This may be due to fear of how what they say will be received. They may wonder what will be said next. If it feels unsafe in the circle, just giving time doesn't help. For example, an agreement can be made in advance so that the pupils can prepare. If a pupil says "pass" very often, it may be a good idea to take the pupil to the side after class and ask what it's about. Perhaps it can be done safely enough with simple moves.

Give options:

The aim is for everyone to share something, even though they're allowed to say "pass". To help with unsafety and someone being quiet, the adult can say, for example:

- ♥ That's fine, can I still ask you a yes/no question?
- ♥ Can you say something a little later when we go around the circle instead?
- ♥ Do you want to say it together with the person sitting next to you?
- ♥ If you want some time to think, then let us know if you want to say anything

When someone can't sit still

The class LIFE SKILLS has to have room for everyone. A goal has to be for all pupils to take part in the conversation and for it to feel safe in the circle. In order to make this happen, the adult has to arrange for it to work for those with body restlessness as well. In almost all classes there are pupils who can't sit still in the circle for an entire hour. They have to be treated in ways that feel safe for them as well. If someone leaves, they have to be welcomed back clearly.

In the conversation with the pupils about the class LIFE SKILLS, the adult can say that everyone is at least involved in the beginning. If it becomes too difficult for someone to participate throughout the whole class, the adults have to find solutions. It's a good idea to make a plan together with the pupil(s) concerned, ahead of the class.

An example of what an agreement with a pupil can be:

- ♥ It's okay that you're restless, but no one can whisper or start something with others
- ♥ It's ok for you to sit in the circle and do something or be in another part of the classroom. Then we have to explain to the others a little about why
- ♥ It's very good that you're involved in the beginning and practice sitting still for as long as possible. If it's necessary, we can agree on a short break outside

If it becomes too difficult for a pupil to sit in the circle and if the pupil wants to, the adult and the pupil can make an agreement about how to explain this to the class.

More people can understand better

Children with special needs always have to be invited, and allowed to stay as long as they can. It's good both for the class and for them, that everyone's part of the community. If some pupils have to bring an assistant to the circle, it's important that the assistant also shares. When differences are talked about more openly and explained as something natural, more pupils will be able to understand more about how children have different ways of reacting.

Find solutions together with the pupil

It's important that the adult doesn't judge or moralise. There's a reason why children do what they do. The adult can ask a pupil in private why and find solutions together with the pupil. If the same pupils aren't speaking, it's a good idea to listen carefully to each of them, to hear if there's anything the adult can do. It can be about where the pupil sits in the circle or whether the pupil prefers to speak early or late. It can also be about the pupil feeling insecure about some of the others. In any case, it's important to try to find solutions.

Don't give up!

There can be many reasons why pupils aren't able to speak in the circle or sit quietly. For many it's unfamiliar. They may not be used to talking in an assembly. Some may have bad experiences with talking about themselves, and others may be unsure of what the task is. It can take some time to get the hang of it, and it's something that needs to be practised. Don't give up, even if not everyone are able to do it the first time. If it's safe enough, all children and young people will share, so we have to continue to give new chances, try new ways and be patient.

When feelings come out

No one can know how a child feels inside by looking at what children do or how they behave. If adults focus on the child's actions, the important questions about what children feel inside may not be asked. Knowledge from children tells us that the important thing is to get to the feelings children carry, and not to focus on getting rid of unwanted behaviour.

In conversations with each other, adults may talk about children who do bad things, are rude or bully others, as bullies or children with behavioural problems. Pupils' behaviour can be given the wrong attention and reactions. Children are also often told off, reprimanded, expelled, given consequences or punished for their behaviour. Children can also be rewarded for quitting.

Behaviour is a language

If children feel uneasy, insecurity, sadness, fear, inadequacy, alienation or other difficult feelings, they can express themselves with different types of "language" or expressions. Emotions can be expressed in many not so charming ways. Children can say things and do actions that can be perceived as unsafe, hurtful or scary both to other children and to adults in school. Some may also try to become "invisible", pretend that everything is fine, be extra cheerful or extra clever. All of these can be signs that children are feeling difficult emotions. Pupils want adults to think that behaviour is a language, that adults become curious about what children are trying to say rather than focusing on the action itself.

Children want to be understood and stopped

A main piece of advice from children is that children WANT help to stop them from saying or doing mean things, being rude or bully others. BUT it has to be done with warmth and understanding that the child actually doesn't want to do this. Children have to be helped to find out what the difficult feelings are about and solutions to how they can feel better.

Building trust through understanding

The adults have to build trust to find out why children do what they do. Children need adults who speak well of them, even when they aren't there. The talk in the staff room can be carried over into the classroom. Children can tell what a teacher thinks about them, through body language and looks.

The main advice from children clearly states that no measures or methods in school should be based on getting rid of behaviour. That will end up with short-term and superficial solutions. Perhaps it will be quieter in the classroom, but it can create more unrest, sadness or insecurity in the child. The clear main advice from children is that they have to be met wisely and taken seriously no matter what "language" they use. Children who do bad or hurtful things would rather not be bad or mean. They can be tough on the outside, but very insecure, scared or small inside. Even when they do something bad, mean or hurtful, and perhaps especially then, they need to be met with warmth and love. By bringing up these topics, the class LIFE SKILLS can create greater understanding among children and adults.



Crying has to be made harmless

A main piece of advice from pupils is that it's good if adults help to make crying harmless. It isn't bad for someone to start crying or to show that you're sad. It's a natural reaction. The adult can say, for instance, "these are tears that maybe should have come a long time ago" or "you are brave, imagine that you dare to show your feelings".

It isn't always a goal to cheer someone up quickly after they've been upset. The adult can comfort, ask if the child wants to say something to everyone about what the tears are about, ask what the child needs - and then help the child to cheer up. For the class, it may help to be given a sentence about why the child is crying. For the child, it may help to sit next to a good friend or next to the adult in the circle. It's a good idea if the adults at the school make it a habit to ask the pupils what they need.

Many pupils have good reasons to be upset and there needs to be room for that. Maybe the child wants to sit in another room with a friend for a while? Maybe they need a chat? Maybe they want to draw what they're sad about. Although the adult may become a little insecure in situations like that, it's important to remember that emotions aren't dangerous. A main piece of advice from the qualitative surveys is that what's dangerous is if emotions aren't expressed.

Difficult & important topics

Many children want to talk about things that are important to them in life. This can also be a topic that is painful and difficult. They need to learn, understand better and know how to get help in painful or difficult situations. Children ask that the painful and difficult things aren't skipped over. If it isn't talked about in school, many children will be without this kind of information and understanding.

A public health nurse or social pedagogue at school can help

Adults may be worried that children may be worse off with talk like that or if they, as adults, are able to meet children who are hurting, in good ways. They may also feel that they don't have enough knowledge about this.

It can be experienced as lonely and sometimes difficult to have the class LIFE SKILLS alone. Sometimes it can also be good to get some new inspiration. The adult can invite another teacher, a public health nurse, a social pedagogue or a school worker to the class. This has to be done in a safe way for the pupils and preferably cleared with the pupils in advance. The adult can be totally honest and tell the pupils that these topics are also a bit unfamiliar for them to talk about.

Children need to know what isn't allowed

Many children haven't known what others in their family or network aren't allowed to do to children. Children who've grown up with violence have said that they thought it was normal to experience violence at home. Many have been in pain and scared, but haven't been able to ask for help. They haven't understood that what they experienced was wrong. All children need to learn what physical and psychological violence is, what abuse is and what adults or other young people aren't allowed to do to children. They also need to know where they can get help. Children have to be given very specific information about this.

Information about what violence and abuse is

All children have to be informed that violence or abuse often is done by someone the child knows and that young people also can do it. They need to know that it can be done by a mum, dad, aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling, cousin, friend of the family or a neighbour. There are no "typical" people who do it. Children also need information that you can care about those who hurt you. Children have to be taught that they shouldn't feel ashamed or that there's something wrong with them, even if they experience this.

Information about what the Child Protection System is

All children have to be given information about what the Child Protection System is, what they can help with and how children can get a hold of the Child Protection System if something is difficult or painful at home. Pupils also need to know that of the children who receive help from the Child Protection System, the vast majority live at home. But they also have to be told that the Child Protection System can move children if the child wants to be moved or if the Child Protection System believes that the child absolutely shouldn't live at home. Ideally, someone from the Child Protection System should come and tell and give this information themselves. At the same time, the pupils can see and get to know the people who work in the Child Protection System. Alternatively, organisations with knowledge of the topic can contribute. The information can be given to entire years or in the class. It's advisable for public health nurses and social pedagogues to participate. They can talk to and take care of the pupils afterwards.

Painful things can come up

Children rarely talk about the most serious things they've experienced in the classroom. But as the class gets to know each other better, the class LIFE SKILLS can be a class where difficult or painful things come up. Some children don't feel safe at home and may experience arguments, being scared, grief, loss or fear. Some have experience with violence or abuse. Through information and conversations about the fact that many children experience unsafety, it can become safe enough and children can gain enough courage to tell. It isn't dangerous for a child to tell about bad things - the alternative could be that children keep on carrying difficult or bad experiences inside for years or live in unsafety without being able to tell.

Take children very seriously

If a child tells about something serious to an adult, it is absolutely essential that the adult listens well to the child. Even if the adult knows the parents and may struggle to believe that they could do something bad to the child, they have to take the child very seriously. This can be done by asking questions that can't be perceived as the adult doubting what the child says. It's important not to dismiss it or explain it away. Even if a child tells something that seems improbable, the adult has to show clearly that they're listening with their heart.

Children can test adults by giving an embellished version or a version about something that is similar but not quite true. In any case, the adult's focus must be to show the child that they know there is something the child wants to tell and that the adult really, really wants to understand.

This can be done in the circle

Say that violence isn't allowed

The adult can explain in the circle that no child should experience violence and abuse, but that it does happen. If a child tells something, the adult can say that it's very painful to hear, that this should never have happened and that there is no excuse for what has happened. It isn't allowed, but there are usually several people in every school who have experienced this.

Show warmth and give strength

If a child tells, the adult needs to clearly show with warm body language, warm words and with feeling that a child should not experience something like that and that it's never the child's fault. The child must not feel that they've said something wrong. The adult can thank the child for sharing. The adult can tell the child, out loud in the circle, that you and the child can talk more about this after the class. In the circle, it's important to quickly lift the courage of the person who has told - and invite the other pupils to say some words of strength to the person who has told something. The adult has to take responsibility for the child coming out strong, not as a victim. After the class, the adult HAS TO quickly follow up with the pupil who has told.



Make an agreement not to share information

It's very important that the adult reminds the class that what a pupil has told in the circle WON'T be shared by anyone other than the pupil themselves. What is told has to stay in the room. The person who told, did so with trust in all the others, and everyone has to show that they can keep that trust. What is told may have created many emotions in other pupils as well. Therefore, the adult also has to say that if any of the other pupils need to talk about thoughts they have or something they feel after the talk in the circle, they can come to the adult.

The adult also has to tell the pupils that if they're going to talk to someone at home about thoughts and feelings after what's been the topic in the circle today, it's important that they don't talk about exactly what the other pupils said at home.

If a child tells you one on one

Dare to react

Show a clear and genuine reaction to the fact that this is serious - with emotion. Put your feelings into words and explain them. The adult can say that they can stand hearing this, but that it hurts to hear it, because no child should feel that way. If you have tears in the corners of your eyes or shed a few tears, this isn't bad, just remember to explain that they come because you think about how difficult it must have been for the child. A few tears, with an explanation afterwards, can simply help the child understand that what they've experienced has actually been painful or wrong. Not all children know this.

Remember that you are qualified

If the child has chosen to open up to you, the child thinks that you have the skills needed for them to be able to tell. You are perceived as safe for the child. The child doesn't care about formal competence, but that you're a safe and warm adult the child can trust.

Talk to the child about options going forwards

Tell the child that there is help available, but that you have to decide together when this should be told to someone else. Tell them that no one should experience the pain that the child has experienced. Explain concretely what different kinds of help is available. Explain that it's possible to get help from the Child Protection System, and that the Child Protection System has to make sure that children are doing well. Most often they help children and families at home, but some children may also be moved. Children can often meet the person who has done something bad or hurtful again, if the child themselves wants to. The child needs to know this. Give the child choices about the way forward. Explain in words that the child understands. Give the child time to think, if the options seem difficult.

Say you're still there

Make the child feel safe that you're there and will continue to be there the best you can, when the child needs you. Children who live in violence can tell more, little by little. Tell the child that you can continue to talk about what the child has told about, if the child wants to. It's good if you try to go the extra mile to follow up with the child. It could be to send some "warm" texts, show that you're thinking about the child, and maybe be available if something were to happen one day. This can make a big difference in a child's life.



What children tell is shared safely

Adults have to tell children honestly about parents' right to information and the school's obligation to report. The adult has to explain what this means to the child and make sure that the child understands what is being explained. The adult has to always make an agreement with the child about what can be shared, who it can be shared with and when it can be shared. Children also have to be given information about how the adults are planning to share the information - whether it's in a letter, on the phone or in a meeting.

Adults have to protect the child

Some children have lived with painful secrets for many years before telling anything. Also, regardless of whether there is something about the conditions at home that makes a child feel bad inside, many children are afraid that their parents will find out. They don't want to worry, hurt or in other ways create problems for the parents. Therefore, what children share with an adult at school always has to be shared in a way that is safe for the child and in close collaboration with the child.

If the child says no to something being shared, it's the adults' task to find out why the child doesn't want something to be shared. The adults' most important job is to protect the child and nothing can be shared until the adult understands why a child is saying no. For many children, this is crucial for maintaining trust in adults. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Norway's constitution clearly state that children have the right to protection.

Collaborate closely with the child

Children who tell about violence or abuse for the first time can easily become uneasy and regret opening up. They can become quiet, explain away, or embellish the story. It's therefore important to work closely with the child. If adults rush or tell carers or other professionals over a child's head, the child may close off and take back what they've said. If the child changes their explanation, they can stay in what is difficult or painful - or it may get worse. Therefore, work closely with the child after they have told.

Info for parents about the class LIFE SKILLS

For parents, the class LIFE SKILLS can be a new and different way of working. It may therefore be a good idea for the schools, at a parents' meeting or in an information leaflet, to tell a little about what the class LIFE SKILLS is, why they have chosen to put it on the timetable and how it is carried out. This is an hour for the entire class, for all the pupils, where you sit in a circle and talk about LIFE. The themes come both from the pupils themselves, from teachers and from the outside world.

Parents have to be informed that this is a measure to promote security for learning and safety for well-being. It's a measure for pupils to get to know each other in the classrooms, promote life skills and thereby also learn better. The school wants to take summarised feedback and advice from pupils around Norway seriously. Many pupils have answered in qualitative surveys that the classroom can feel unsafe and that it destroys well-being and learning.

The class LIFE SKILLS will help the schools with this. It's a tool for better learning. It's for inclusion and against bullying. Work is being done to make the room so safe that pupils can be honest and learn how to accept the honesty of others. The starting point is that what happens in the circle, stays in the circle. The adults at school talk about this with the pupils. If the pupils talk to those at home about something that has happened in the circle, they should only share their thoughts and feelings about the topic - not anything about what other pupils have said. In connection with the class LIFE SKILLS, it's important to encourage parents to be interested in their own child and not dig into what other pupils said or did.

It's important that the information from the school, whether written or verbal, comes to the parents with a positive sign and from confident adults, so that the parents realise how lucky they are to have their children in a school with the class LIFE SKILLS.



Experiences from headmasters and teachers

Pupils and adults have become more generous with each other

"Creating a safe and good school environment is my most important task as headmaster... As headmaster, I see that our work with LIFE has brought pupils and adults closer together. The pupils dare to take off their "masks" and show who they are. We see how important it is for pupils to learn to talk about feelings and topics that interest them. LIFE provides a safer class and learning environment. Pupils and adults develop a positive respect for each other".

Bjørg Irene Hagen, headmaster in primary school, Bergen.

Pupils who are rarely verbal enrich with their input

"When I was first introduced to the class LIFE SKILLS, I thought that this was something I already did and could do. I thought it seemed very similar to class meetings or social conversations after a difficult break. It was perhaps a bit more structured, I thought. But after a few weeks, I realised that this is something completely different from what I have done before!

LIFE is something our pupils have longed for without knowing it. It is something that I, as a teacher, have wanted for a long time without knowing that it could be so simple. There is mental health in every class, something today's youth desperately need. Parents no longer allow their children to be sad, they want to deprive their children of any form of pain. But the truth is that we have to practise the bad feelings too. Without practise, it will be difficult to deal with them once they come with great strength. This is relational work.

My advice to all teachers in Norway is: Dare to try, dare to be vulnerable, dare to lose control. By putting LIFE on the timetable, we will have pupils who feel more safe. Learning gets an enormous boost, and the school becomes a good place to be for more people.

Finally, I would like to share an example from one of our classes in the 7th grade, where the topic was jealousy. A 23-year-old student said this in the circle: "What I'm going to say now, I've actually never said to anyone in the entire world before. When I was in the 5th grade, my little sister, who is two years younger than me, got cancer. She struggled for three years before recovering. Every single day at school during this bad time, the teachers and others asked me: How is your sister? No one ever asked the question: How are you? What is it like to have a sister who has cancer? I only now realised that my bad feelings can be called jealousy, and they felt taboo at the time."

The pupils' tears flowed, mine and the boy's own. It became completely silent. We learned a lot from him sharing his feelings with us during this class."

Janicke Walde Torvund, primary school teacher, Bergen.

An unusually content-rich and relationship-building experience

"For me as an adult, it has been a rare content-rich and relationship-building experience. I have been lucky enough to talk to the city's coolest kids about key aspects of being human. Conflict-reducing language, mental health and ill-health, what characterises good relationships, different types of violence and abuse, how to get help, what is good boundary-setting, and not least - the future!

An informal survey in my pupil group resulted in the following answers:

The classes create engagement in the class. You make people ask questions and we get answers to things we wonder about. Not least, we get honest answers to what we ask. You become more aware of your mental health. You have talked to us about things that almost no other adults talk about, and that we don't necessarily learn at home. It makes people open up more. You get to know more about other people's problems, which means you don't feel so different and alone. It makes us safer - and safer in each other. It makes us understand other people's opinions better. It has also helped a lot in that we have learned how to see if others are struggling.

At first I didn't understand the value of it, but eventually I understood more about how you should talk to others, be nicer. I have become better at coping with a number of situations after we started these classes. You become more prepared for LIFE, because you know more about what awaits you in it. I like that it focuses on formation in education. It makes it easier to become a participant in society, not just a part of it. You learn to take care of others, but not least yourself!"

Rebecca Tangen Annesdatter, teacher at secondary school, Drammen.

We get a better class environments

"Many young people struggle to cope with their own lives. They experience many challenges both at school and at home, but also on social media and in their circle of friends. In the class LIFE SKILLS, we can give pupils tools that make them better equipped to cope with everyday life, and problems that may arise. Pupils who don't stand on a stable platform in life can't learn other subjects either.

We have worked with the class LIFE SKILLS for just over 3 years, and see that we get a better class environment, a greater degree of empathy in the pupil group and better cohesion in the class. The pupils get to know each other in a different way, and we see that the balance of power in the pupil group is changing. Pupils who may not be so "good" academically, can be great resources in this type of conversation. Our pupils were a little sceptical in the beginning, but became very fond of the classes as time went on. As one of our pupils said, "I stress less and feel better." The only side effect I see is that the grades have gone up".

Aud Lindholm and Hilde Gullaker, secondary school, Horten.