

# RACCOON CIRCLES

## THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING



Raccoon Circles are an innovative, simple and easy technique for building unity, community, connection and teamwork with any group. This collection of Raccoon Circle activities, ideas, suggestions and stories will help you teach, train, counsel, facilitate, coach and manage your group, and connect them in the process.

This document now belongs to YOU. You can share it, post it to the web, make copies of it, distribute it, put it in your staff training manuals, use these activities at your next staff retreat, conference or business meeting, translate it, include it in the next book you are writing, print it out on special paper and gift wrapped it for your favorite teacher, trainer or facilitator, use it with your kid's summer sport team, download it, upload it, email it to a friend and basically share it with everyone. You have permission, now go out there and make something wonderful happen!



*CONNECTING EVERYONE IN THE WORLD - ONE RACCOON CIRCLE AT A TIME*

**JIM CAIN**

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**25 PAGES AND 18 ACTIVITIES THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD!**

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a testimony to the internet that Wikipedia includes the Raccoon Circle as a component of teambuilding. It was in fact the internet itself that was the first home of raccoon circle activities, long before any print publications existed on the topic. Since that time, over 100,000 copies of various editions of Raccoon Circle documents and books have been downloaded, purchased and used around the world (in over 110 countries, so far).

With just a simple 15 foot (4.6 meter) long segment of tubular climbing webbing, you can now lead more than 200 different team and community building activities, and that list grows each day. In fact, in this official internet edition of Raccoon Circles, you can now submit your own unique Raccoon Circle activities, photographs and stories, and add to the growing world of connection (for more information on submitting your Raccoon Circle activity idea or story, see the contest section near the end of this document).

This latest collection of Raccoon Circle activities is unique. It is completely transferable to anybody, anywhere. You have permission to share this document electronically (digitally), post it to your favorite blog, allow folks to download it from your website, print it for your next staff training event, include it in your conference's proceedings, incorporate it into your next writing project, email it to your friends, translate it for your audience, and share it however and whenever you wish. Just please share the entire document. You have permission, now go make something wonderful happen!

In his book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler suggested that high tech demands high touch. In our digitally enhanced world, Raccoon Circles have become the *world-wide-webbing* - the perfect antidote for creating real, tangible connection in a world that is exceedingly more unconnected.

On the following pages, you'll find activities, ideas, suggestions, stories and other information for making Raccoon Circles part of your world. Use them to build unity, community, connection and teamwork within your group. And share this document and Raccoon Circles with your friends everywhere. Help make Raccoon Circles the authentic **world-wide-webbing!**

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# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING

## BASIC TRAINING

### WHAT IS A RACCOON CIRCLE?

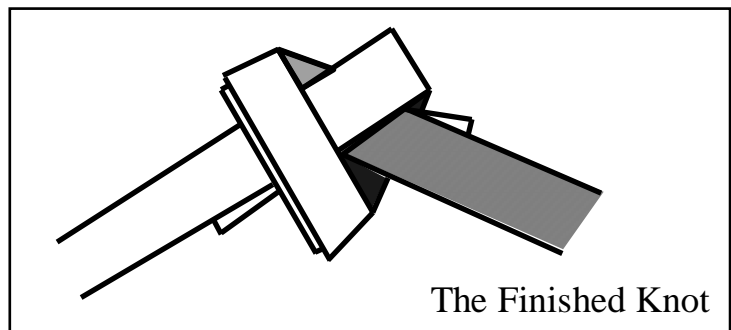
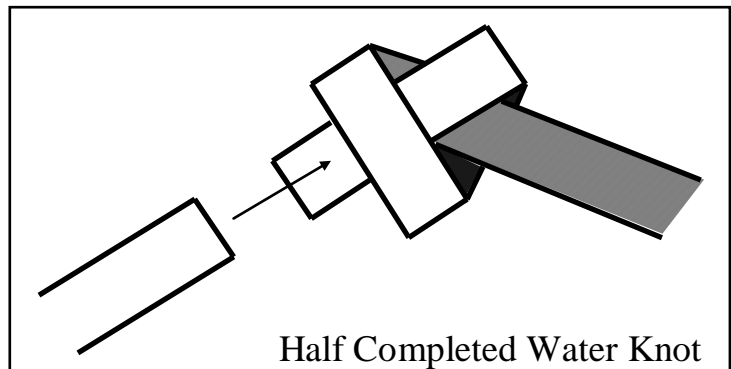


A Raccoon Circle is about 15 feet (4.6 meters) of tubular climbing webbing, which is available in different colors and patterns at many outdoor stores that sell climbing gear, horse tack shops, ropes course builders and teambuilding suppliers. While 1 inch (2.54 cm) wide webbing is most popular, smaller widths can also be used, as well as large diameter climbing ropes. It was named by Dr. Tom Smith and that story can be found on page 15 of this document.

### TYING A WATER KNOT

The most convenient way to circle a single Raccoon Circle, or join multiple Raccoon Circles together is with a water knot (*named by river rafting guides that used this style of knot to secure loads with webbing on their rafts*).

Form an overhand knot with one end of the webbing, then feed the other end of the webbing backwards through this knot to complete the water knot (see illustrations).



When asked about having invented the Raccoon Circle, Tom said,  
"Invented is a funny word. I tied a knot in a piece of webbing!"

Tom Smith

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## ICEBREAKERS AND OPENING ACTIVITIES

### W.A.M.F. (WRAPPED AROUND MY FINGER)

W.A.M.F. stands for Wrapped Around My Finger, and pretty much explains this entire activity. Begin with an unknotted Raccoon Circle. One person in the group begins wrapping the webbing around their index finger, and while doing so, provides the group with some information about themselves (where they were born, family members, school experiences, childhood pets, dreams, goals, favorite foods, etc.) The goal is for this person to continue talking until the webbing is completely wrapped around their finger. When they reach the end, they allow the webbing to unwind and pass it along to the next person in the group.

This particular activity provides a bit more time for folks to talk about themselves, and also provides a kinesthetic activity coupled with a verbal activity for exploring multiple intelligence opportunities and whole brain learning possibilities. There is also a popular theory that for folks that may be a bit shy about speaking to even a small group in public, the action of wrapping the webbing around their finger occupies that portion of the brain that controls nervousness. By wrapping and rapping at the same time, the speech center becomes less inhibited and the person talking is less stressed. It is also surprising what participants discuss during this wrapping and rapping session. The 15-foot length of the Raccoon Circle allows more than a minutes worth of communication, which means you'll learn quite a bit more about a person than just their name and where they live.



### TWICE AROUND THE BLOCK

This newest Raccoon Circle activity is a playful and fun icebreaker. You'll need one knotted Raccoon Circle per group of about 5 or 6 people. The person nearest the knot lets go of the Raccoon Circle and begins introducing themselves to the group. The remaining members of the group are responsible for slowly moving the knot twice around the circle. When the knot reaches the person talking the second time, their turn is over. Group members actually control the time allotted to each person. If they are enjoying the story, they can elect to slow down the movement of the knot, or they can speed up to bring the introduction to a close more quickly.

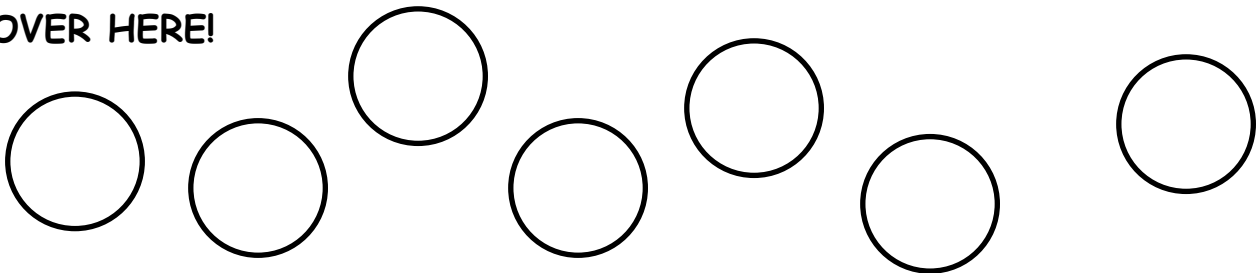
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Groups often laugh as they speed up the movement of the knot, but then typically allow the person talking to respectfully finish their introduction. Fun for everyone, and especially for the group to feel in control of the length of time each person talks.



**OVER HERE!**



If your goal is to build an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion within your group, this is the perfect activity for you. Begin by spreading several knotted Raccoon Circles around on the floor or ground (one for every four to six participants). The object here is to discuss some things that participants have in common and then to decide which person has the most (or least, or best, etc.) of these. For example, in each group, find out who has the most brothers and sisters. The facilitator should allow the group a few seconds for discussion, and then says loudly, "one, two three," and the rest of the group replies, "See Ya!" as they bid farewell to the person with the most brothers and sisters. This person then leaves this group.

Each circle has now lost a member of their group. Encourage them to attract a new member by yelling, "over here, over here, over here!" Once everyone has found a new group, a new question is given to the group, such as, "who is wearing the most jewelry?" After a few minutes, "one, two, three..... See Ya!"

For additional time or to learn a bit more about the other folks in the group, the facilitator can have two questions for each encounter. The first should be a topic for discussion that the whole group can discuss and for which they are likely to have something in common. For example, what is the best deserts you have ever had? Then the second question can be a brief one, followed by "one, two, three..... See Ya!"

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Here are some additional questions for "Over Here!"

Who has the most books in their person library collection?

Who has watched the most videos or movies this month?

Who has traveled the farthest distance from here?

Who traveled the farthest distance today?

Who has the most living family members?

Who has the most unusual middle name?

Who is wearing the cleanest shoes?

Who has the coolest watch?

Who has the longest hair?

Who is the tallest?

## WHERE YA FROM, WHERE YA BEEN?

During one Raccoon Circle activity session, a member of our group mentioned that they were born in Scotland. Another member of the group was unfamiliar with this location, and so we formed the geographical outline of Scotland with our Raccoon Circle (like a giant map). Next, several group members told stories about their travels to Scotland, which led to the creation of the following activity.



Where Ya From? Where Ya Been? has become a great way for each person in the group to share 'their story.' One at a time, they create the outline of where they are from, or similarly someplace they have recently visited, and then tell stories about these important places in their lives.

At a leadership conference I attended, one keynote speaker mentioned that there are three things that we each uniquely own: our name, our reputation and our story. Where Ya From? Where Ya Been? gives each member of the group a chance to tell their story.



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## MY LIFE LINE

Begin this activity by placing an unknotted Raccoon Circle line on the ground or floor for each group of four to six participants. One person in each group begins sharing some of the highlights of their life, beginning with where they were born, as they walk along the length of the Raccoon Circle line. When they reach the present day, there will still be some portion of the line left untraveled. Here they can discuss what some of their goals and plans are for the future. Other members of the group walk along with the person sharing their life line. When one person completes their story, another member of the group can begin the story of their life line.

## TEAMBUILDING CHALLENGES

### THE MISSING LINK



The Missing Link is a perfect activity for teaching consensus building within a group. Begin with two Raccoon Circles of different colors, tied individually with water knots. These two circles can either be linked together (like links of chain) or unlinked but lying near each other.

Place both loops on the ground, in such a manner so it is difficult to tell whether the two loops are in fact linked or unlinked. Now assign the group the task of achieving a consensus as to whether the two loops are linked or unlinked, without touching the Raccoon Circles. Invite those who believe the circles are linked to stand together on the right side, and those who believe they are unlinked, on the left side. Next invite partnerships between the members of each side (so that a 'linked' believer is paired with an 'unlinked' believer). The discussion that takes place between partners is a great lesson in learning to understand other people, and listen to their viewpoints.



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## INSIDE / OUT



This is one of my favorite activities. It is not only a great initial problem solving activity, but also one that allows a group to discuss a very serious cultural issues, namely, ethical behavior.

Begin with a Raccoon Circle on the floor. Have a group of five to seven participants step inside the circle. The task is now for this group to go from the inside of the circle to the outside, by going underneath the Raccoon Circle, without anyone in the group using their hands, arms or shoulders.

It is important to stress the group problem solving process in this activity. In order for other members of the group to assist in the completion of the task, they need to know the plan, and what their part is in the solution. To this end, encourage the group to "plan their work" and then "work their plan." This means that prior to ANY action, the group will need to plan their approach to solving this problem, and making sure that everyone in the group knows their part of the plan.

It is typical that participants do in fact use their arms, shoulders and hands during this activity. Not that they grasp the webbing with their hands, but often they will use hands to balance each other, to hold up their leg while completing the task, or to crawl on their hands and knees.



After completing the task, debriefing questions include asking the group if they had a plan, and did they change the plan during the completion of the activity, and if so, why? As a second part to this activity, you can also ask the group to go Outside In, again without using their hands, arms or shoulders... and see if they "plan their work" before "working their plan." Debriefing questions for this second version can include, "how long did you spend planning Inside Out compared to Outside In?" Why was there a difference? And finally, to introduce ethical issues, "how do you feel about following the guidelines of not using your arms, shoulders or hands? For example, did anyone crawl on the ground, using their knees and hands?"

The ethical dilemma of group members using their arms, shoulders or hands, when specifically instructed not to, does not need to turn into a discussion about rules, but more about interpretation of such rules. For example, rather than asking why group members did not follow the rules, ask how the rules could have been better presented so that no interpretation errors would occur.

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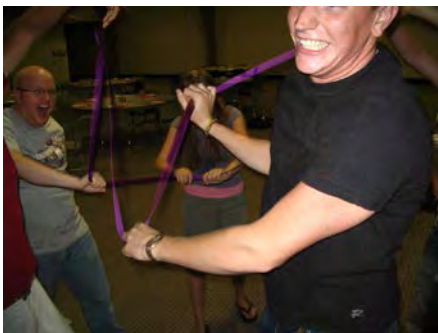
## OVER THE FENCE

Here is a simpler and improved version of the classic adventure activity, the Electric Fence. Begin with two participants holding a Raccoon Circle, approximately 6 inches above ground level, with the long parallel sides of the Raccoon Circle about 12 inches apart. Place half of the group on each side of the Raccoon Circle "fence." The first two persons (one from each side, one at a time) to cross the "fence" have the fence at 6 inches from the ground. The next two persons have the height increased to 12 inches, and so on. The maximum height, even for large groups is 4 feet (about 1.3 meters).

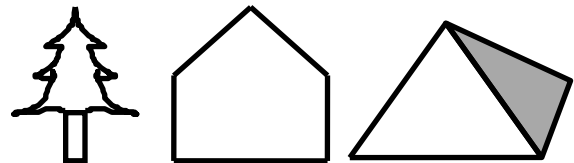
This version of the Electric Fence places spotters on both sides of the fence at all times. It also provides a changing level of challenge to the group. Even at the lowest levels, it is required that all participants crossing the fence, be in contact with at least 2 other participants at ALL times during the crossing. Allowing two participants to hold the Raccoon Circle also leaves an opportunity for a participant that may wish not to be passed over the fence. Or, if the holders do wish to pass over, they can rotate into and out of the holding positions with other team members during the event.

## SHAPE UP!

Using a knotted Raccoon Circle, with all member of the group holding on, form the following letters, numbers and shapes as quickly as possible. Three-dimensional shapes are also possible, such as cubes, trees, pyramids, igloos, planes, and other basic 3-D shapes.



**A, B, C ... X, Y, Z**  
**1, 2, 3 ... ?, @, &**



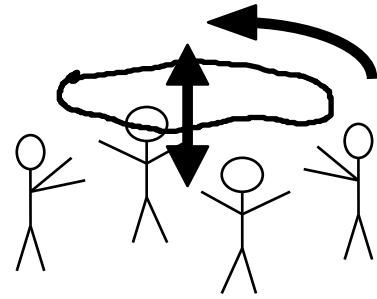
For a campfire skit (or a performance art piece) let different groups with appropriate color Raccoon Circles create the different shapes or objects in the story (such as green trees, a yellow sun, people, animals and other objects of various colors). Or, combine forces to have several groups each make a portion of a larger object (such as the tracks, engine, wheels, smoke, coal car and caboose of a small train).

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## TOSSING PIZZA

This activity definitely fits into the "harder than it looks" category. Begin with a group of 5-8 participants holding onto a knotted Raccoon Circle, hands upward, elbows straight, with no slack in the circle. The challenge is for the group to toss this Raccoon Circle pizza into the air, at least to the height of their heads, and then for everyone in the group to catch the circle as it drops back down, without anyone moving their feet.

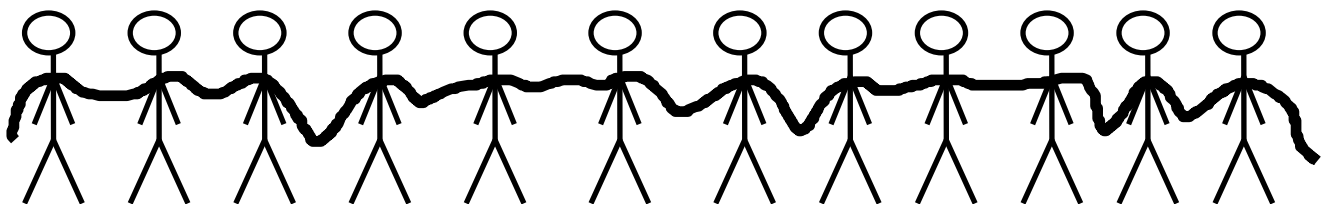


After a few unsuccessful attempts, encourage the group to plan their task, brainstorm new ideas and try them. A good pizza flipping team can toss their Raccoon Circle pizza in the air three times without anyone in the group dropping it or moving their feet.

For a higher level of challenge, the ultimate pizza chefs can spin their pizza dough in the air. For the Raccoon Circle pizza, this means tossing the pizza into the air and having the knot come back down at least one person to the right or left of where it was when it was launched. A little 'spin action' can actually improve the team's performance. This simple problem solving activity is a fun way to begin the 'working as a team' portion of your program.

## THE CHAIN GANG

Here is a simple challenge for moving a group from one location to another. Begin with the entire team standing in a line, one person standing just behind the next. Starting with the leading participant, place a continuous piece of webbing (or several Raccoon Circles tied together) on the right shoulder of each person. The goal of the group is to see how far they can walk, without allowing the webbing to touch the ground or slide off of their shoulders, or to be touched with their arms or hands. As they walk, the webbing typically sways, slides and (eventually) will fall off. After the first failure, invite the team to brainstorm ideas for improvement (such as standing on opposite sides of the rope). For safety reasons, only place the rope upon participants' shoulders, NEVER around their necks or attached to their clothing.



← Walk this direction

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# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING GAMES

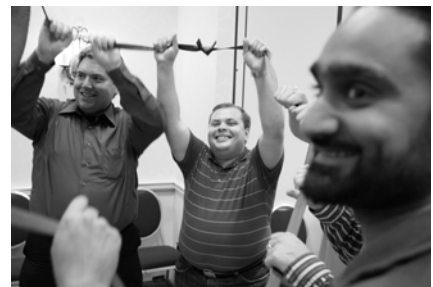
## GRAND PRIX RACING

Now that you have turned the Raccoon Circle into a complete circle or loop using a water knot, you are ready for the ultimate in sport racing. This activity will boost the enthusiasm of your audience, and provide some moderate competition in the process.

Begin by spreading several Raccoon Circles around the available space, in close proximity to each other. Ask participants to join one of the 'racing teams,' picking their favorite color in the process. This activity works best with approximately 5 to 7 participants per Raccoon Circle. Have participants hold the Raccoon Circle with both hands in front of them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! It is summertime, and that means one thing in this part of the world - Grand Prix Racing! Now I know that you are such die-hard race fans that just the thought of a race makes your heart beat faster. So this race comes in three parts. First, when I say that "we're going to have a race", your response is a primal grunt. Next I'll say, "start your engines!" and I want to hear your best racecar sounds (audience practices making race car revving engine, shifting gears and braking sounds). Finally, with so many cars on the track today, it will be difficult to see just which group finishes their race first, so we'll need a sign indicating when your group is finished. That sign is to raise your hands (and the Raccoon Circle) above your heads and yell "Yessssssssss!"

Logistically, Grand Prix involves having the group transfer the knot around the group as quickly as possible, using only their hands. This activity can even be performed for a seated audience. To begin, you'll need a "start / finish" line, which can be the person that was born the farthest distance away from the present location. The race begins at this location, and ends when the knot is passed around the circle, and returns to this same location (Yessssssss!)



Typically in Raccoon Circle Grand Prix racing, there are three qualifying rounds or races. The first race is a single lap race to the right, with the knot traveling once around the inside of the circle to the right (counterclockwise). The second race is a multi-lap race (two or three laps) to the left (clockwise) around the circle. And the final race of the series is a 'winner take all' championship race, with one lap to the right (counterclockwise) followed by one lap to the left (clockwise).

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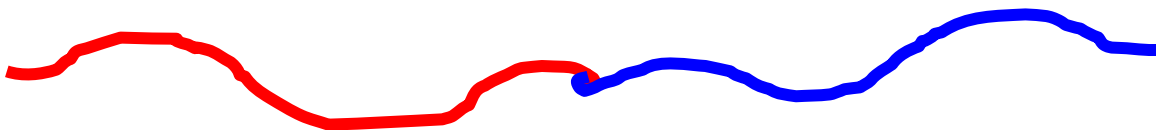
Incidentally, after this activity, the group will not only be energized, but perhaps in a slightly competitive mood. From a sequencing standpoint, you can either continue this atmosphere (with more competitive challenges or introduce a bit of counterpoint, by following this activity with one that requires the group working together in a collaborative manner.

As second variation of this activity, rather than a typical oval or circular racetrack, use the Raccoon Circle to construct a Figure-8 racetrack. When you begin the race, "On your mark, get set, go!" some groups will not immediately understand which way to move their hands in order to move the knot clockwise around the group. This is yet another simple but effective problem solving opportunity.

One final variation, and one of our favorites, is the pit stop. For the final long race of the season, spin the webbing two laps to the left, then everyone lets go, places the Raccoon Circle on the ground, spins around 360 degrees on their own, picks up the Raccoon Circle, and finishes by racing two laps back to the right. The energy in your group will be very high by this point.

## RACCOON CIRCLE JOUSTING

Here is a challenging activity for two participants that requires balance, skill and a certain amount of understanding and anticipation of the other player's moves. It is also an excellent introduction into non-contact forms of martial arts where anticipating your opponents moves are paramount. Use two Raccoon Circles that have been tied together with a single water knot in the middle, to form a 30 foot (9 meters) long line.



Two contenders (participants) now stand with their feet together about 10 feet (3 meters) apart, holding only the very ends of the long Raccoon Circle. The object is to make the other person either let go of the Raccoon Circle, or to take a step by pulling, yanking and controlling the Raccoon Circle.

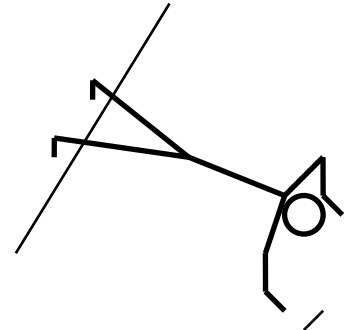
You can modify the positions in this activity for three people, by using three raccoon circles in a Y formation. You can also accommodate four players by arranging four Raccoon Circles in a square or cross formation. You can even turn this into an activity for the entire group by using one very large circle made by tying several Raccoon Circles together. After experiencing how it feels to be pulled off balance, introduce the group to the concept of the yurt circle, and see if everyone can balance without pulling anyone off their platform.

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## PENCIL PUSHERS

Don't be fooled, this simple activity is extremely physically challenging. Stretch an untied Raccoon Circle into a line. This is the starting point. The challenge now is for teams of three to four participants to push a new, unsharpened pencil beyond the line and across the floor, making contact with only their hands on the floor. This challenge typically results in the group forming some type of human bridge, with the first person's feet just behind the line and other team members climbing over them as they extend the bridge. The winners are those that push the pencil the furthest distance and still are able to return behind the line, without touching the floor in front of the line with anything but their hands.



"He drew a circle that shut me out --  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in."

Edwin Markham

"I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don't see it as the handing down of answers."

Alice Walker

"We dance in a circle and suppose, while the secret sits in the middle and knows."

Robert Frost

"Gathering in circles is an ancient practice being revived in our time."

Parker J. Palmer

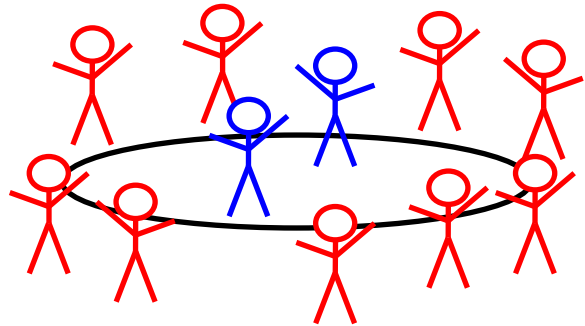
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# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING

## REVIEWING ACTIVITIES

### STEP INTO THE CIRCLE

At the completion of an activity, have the group gather around a large circle made from multiple Raccoon Circles that have been knotted together and placed on the ground. After proposing a question to the group, anyone wishing to answer is asked to step into the circle, so that each person might be heard.



Reviewing continues until no one is left standing inside the circle. This technique provides everyone in the group the opportunity to speak, and a visual cue for the facilitator to know how many people would like to contribute.

### SHUFFLE LEFT / SHUFFLE RIGHT

Here is a reviewing technique that includes kinesthetic movement. If your group prefers activity and doesn't like to sit still for any length of time, this technique is perfect. Begin by inviting the group to stand closely together around a Raccoon Circle that has been placed on the ground. Participants can hold hands, interlocking elbows with their neighbors or place their arms around each other. Begin by saying, "shuffle left" for a short distance until someone that has a comment to make says "STOP!" After they have their say, they remark "shuffle right" and the circle moves to the right until another person says stop and offers their commentary.



Don't be afraid to let the circle move quite a distance - it may take a few moments for some participants to formulate their comments. If you like, you can suggest that anytime the circle completes one full revolution without any stops, reviewing will stop and the group will move on.

"In a circle of trust, we learn an alternate way to respond, centered on the rare art of asking honest, open questions — questions that invite a speaker to reach .... deeper."

Parker J. Palmer

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## REVIEWING ACTIVITIES

### A KNOT FOR EVERY TEACHABLE MOMENT

Throughout the program, each time a teachable moment is encountered, the group places a single knot onto an initially unknotted Raccoon Circle. Before a new knot is added, the group reviews all previous knots to insure that the learning is not lost. At the end of the day, untie each knot as the group identifies and reflects on each teachable moment.



As an alternative, at the completion of the program, the facilitator can review each of the knots, and then cut them apart, giving one knot to each participant in the group. This process can also be used in corporate settings so that one person takes the responsibility to return to the workplace and take action on the lesson learned.

## CLOSING ACTIVITIES

### A Circle of Connection

It is helpful for a group to perform this activity on the outside of a knotted Raccoon Circle that has been placed on the ground (to help keep the group in a circle). The facilitator begins by sharing some information about what they have learned during the program. When another participant has also experienced that insight, they link elbows with the previous person and begin to share some of their personal learnings. The activity continues until all members of the group have 'linked together.' The final task is for the last person to continue sharing until the first person can link with them. At this point, there is an opportunity to say, "...and by the way. Those things which link us together, bring us a bit closer together as well!"

As a closing activity, group members can share their thoughts, comments and feelings about the program or goals for the future.

You can find more closing activities by downloading the document "Closing Activities and Songs" at the T&T website ([www.teamworkandteamplay.com](http://www.teamworkandteamplay.com)).

Find this document at: [www.teamworkandteamplay.com](http://www.teamworkandteamplay.com)

# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING

## STORIES OF THE CIRCLE

### Notes from Dr. Tom Smith

In the 1960's I studied with and about the Native Americans. I spent time during the summer camping and teaching pow-wows in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and on my third visit I was given (and I took) the name "Raccoon." It was suggested by the elders, and after some soul-searching and dialogue, I began to understand why it was an appropriate name. I did not use my native name for the next twenty years, but when I started presenting training workshops for challenge and adventure educators and other professional groups in the 1980's, I sometimes used the name. When I retired in 1987 to develop my own consulting and training business, I called it the "Raccoon Institute."

It was also in the early 1960's, and every summer thereafter for 25 years, that I organized and facilitated 10-12 day outdoor adventures for groups of adolescents and adults. Participants were told that they would share a small group experience involving a 'personal growth journey to the wilderness.' The trips involved camping, climbing, caving, and a 4-5 day canoe trip in the Boundary Waters on the Minnesota-Canada border. Although my professional academic training was as a clinical psychologist, I had evolved through time to become an experiential educator and personal growth facilitator. By the 1970's my business card announced that I was a "psychologist/wilderness guide." I had come to realize the importance of the connection between the 'wilderness beyond' and the 'wilderness within.'

In the mid-1970's I learned about rope and team course methodology. I built my first teams and high rope course in 1975, and thereafter my adventure group sequence included experiences on that course. I had come to recognize the value of teams course experiences in the personal growth journey.

However, in the early 1980's, I heard voices from teachers, youth workers, counselors and corporate trainers asking for activities that they could use in classrooms, schoolyards, and corporate centers. They sought experiential activities that might create the same individual and group dynamics as the ropes course and/or the wilderness adventure - trust, cooperation, communication, risk-taking, commitment, empowerment, problem solving, etc. I began to develop my personal 'bag-of-tricks' with which I could create those dynamics. I drew on my experiences with the Human Potential Movement, New Games, Sensory and Somatic Awareness, and the Native Americans. Like many other leaders of challenge and adventure experiences, I prided myself in being able to facilitate two and three day training sessions with just the contents of my backpack - no ropes or teams course, and no outdoor adventure to the 'wilderness beyond.' I especially prized those activities that were simple and portable but still guided participants to explore the 'wilderness within.' Like most facilitators, I

was always adding new ideas to my 'bag-of-tricks,' and sometimes replacing or discarding ideas that seemed less effective.

Then, in the early 1990's, I discovered the magic, the simplicity, and the power of a sequence of activities using only a length of tubular nylon webbing. At the time, that web loop became just another carry along for my 'bag-of-tricks.' I'm sure that other challenge and adventure leaders had explored activities with web loops or rope circles before that, as I have learned that nothing we think of as 'new' really is!

Then, in 1994, I was asked to co-facilitate the opening celebration of Northeastern Illinois University's T.E.A.M. conference with Karl Rohnke. I passed out twenty circles of webbing and there were twenty groups of people sharing the joys, the dynamics, and the healing powers of the web loops. Karl was taking pictures from high above, and after we finished he asked me what the circle of webbing was called. I informed him that I just called them "web circles," and he, with a second from my friend, Bill Quinn, suggested that a nice name for the activities would be "Raccoon Circles."

That was nearly a decade ago now. Boy, time does fly when you're having fun! The web loop and the associated activities that became "Raccoon Circles," can now be found in the bag-of-tricks of many facilitators and adventure educators. Over 1500 copies of my little booklet of instructions have been distributed, and probably double that amount copied over the years. Jim Cain recently placed a handbook for facilitators of Raccoon Circles on the Teamwork & Teamplay website, and reported that the website had experienced thousands of downloads around the world. Shortly after this, Jim and I decided to collaborate on this project. His enthusiasm, knowledge of adventure-based activities, and writing style; and my work with the ritual, ceremony and philosophy of circles seemed like a natural partnership, and it has been a joy working together. We hope you enjoy the fruits of our labors. We certainly have.

## **A Visit to the Library**

Jim Cain

On a somewhat humorous note... while presenting at an adventure-based facilitation conference in Boulder, Colorado a few years ago, a staff member from the University of North Carolina - Wilmington campus library told me that "The Book on Raccoon Circles" had become the 'most stolen' book from the campus library, replacing "A Sand County Almanac" by Aldo Leopold.

Find this document at: [www.teamworkandteamplay.com](http://www.teamworkandteamplay.com)

## **A Raccoon Circle Story**

Jean Berube

Director of Discovery Programs  
Gallaudet University  
Washington, D.C.

The Gallaudet University Discovery staff has been sharing our challenge education program with interested groups in Russia. For more than a decade, we have been giving a four-day seminar at the Raoul Wallenberg University in St. Petersburg on the theory and philosophy behind the Discovery Program and sharing activities that give practical application of the program. Interested administrators, faculty and staff, students - both hearing and deaf, and area psychologists and teachers have all attended these seminars. One of the events we always bring to these seminars is our collection of Raccoon Circle activities. In sharing the Raccoon Circle, we always start by talking about the importance of circles in our lives and how we can share our energy with others when we come together in circles. We have talked about how wonderful the Raccoon Circle is as it can bring people together who may not be able, for whatever reason, to touch each other. On past visits, we have left some Raccoon Circles at the University for their use.

This past year, one of the teachers shared a beautiful story with us, and I would like to share it with the challenge/adventure education community. Tanya Zinkevitch-Evstigneeva explained that her professional training was in deaf education and she has been involved in the deaf education program at the University in the past. She and another teacher recently developed a fairy tale therapy program that she takes to schools and orphanages where she works with troubled children. She always begins her therapeutic sessions with the Raccoon Circle.

Recently, a little girl was found at the railroad station in St. Petersburg. This little girl had no language skills and was hard of hearing. She was homeless and without parents. She was brought to a school for the hard of hearing. This little girl would not allow anyone to touch her. Since she had no name, the people at the school gave her the name Sveta. When Tanya would come to the school to do the fairy tale therapy with the children, Sveta would stand in the corner and watch. One day, as Tanya began the Raccoon Circle activities, Sveta came over and joined the group. Each time thereafter, Sveta would come and join the Raccoon Circle as Tanya would begin the therapeutic journey with the children. Then one particular day, as the children were releasing the circle, Sveta held on and when the last child let go, Sveta ran to her room with the Raccoon Circle, and closed the door. Tanya watched through the keyhole to see what Sveta was doing. Sveta began placing the Raccoon Circle on her bed, making different shapes, almost as if she was trying to build a nest. None of the shapes seemed to please her, so she finally folded up the circle and used it as a pillow. Whenever Sveta left her room, she would wear the Raccoon Circle around her neck as a necklace, or she would hide it under her clothes. Tanya never asked for the circle back. However, she

did ask Sveta if she would share "her" circle with the other children. Sometimes Sveta was able to share and other times she was not. The Raccoon Circle became known as "Sveta's Circle." Sveta would suck on the circle, play with it in her fingers, and always loved it.

One day, Sveta left the circle in the play area after the fairy tale session. She did not come back to get it for a couple of days, so Tanya brought it home to wash it, because it had become quite filthy. When Tanya brought the circle back, the children said it was not "their" circle. Tanya assured them it was theirs, and that she had only taken it home to wash it. She finally convinced the children to try the circle. They did, and accepted it again as being their circle, but they made Tanya promise that she would NEVER wash it again.

Tanya Zinkevitch-Evstigneeva and Tanya Grabenko, both teachers in Russia, have written a collection of fairy tales. In the collection, there is a story entitled, "A Magic Circle." The story is based on the story of Sveta and the Raccoon Circle. Anna Golovnia, a Russian Discovery staff person and one of our interpreters, translated the story for me before we returned to the United States. The story begins...

*...Once upon a time, there was a little girl. This little girl lived in a big city, but she did not live in a beautiful house with white stone walls, nor in a colorfully decorated wooden house, nor in a king's palace. Her home was a cold and damp dungeon, where water was always seeping from the ceiling, and the floor was covered, not with parquet, but with wet thatch. The little girl slept, not on a feather bed with silk covered pillows, but on slippery, wet stones. At night, the little girl tried to stay warm by wrapping her torn and tattered clothes around her. Her favorite delicacies were dark dry bread and frozen potato peelings which seemed wonderfully sweet to her. The plain boiled water from the leaky tin cup from which she drank was so tasty! She had no nannies nor servants to take care of her. Instead, she had poor homeless people, like herself, who watched out for her.*

*No one could remember how this little girl came to the dungeon. They didn't even know her name, so they called her "Baby." Even in such God forsaken places, wonderful meetings can happen. These wonderful meetings would happen for Baby when a lonesome stranger would come and join the group that would be huddled around the fire. He would come and find a place and would be given a cup of water and a rusk that would seem to him to be the tastiest thing in the world. Joy and gratitude would always fill this traveler's heart because these unfortunate people were always willing to share their last piece of bread and give you a place near the fire...*

The authors have written, "You know, dear friends, that nothing protects us better than the company of nice and friendly people with whom we feel as comfortable as if we were home." The story continues by saying the stranger is now at the fire and Baby is sitting beside him. You might say to me, "so what? A Stranger by the fire." but

believe me, dear friends, that nothing in our world happens by chance. Each meeting and each person brings something new and special into our lives. Oh, how lucky we would be not to miss, not to pass by any of those magical gifts. IT would be so wonderful to absorb all these new experiences, and treasure the talents and generosity of those around us, or even feel the bitterness of disappointment. We grow wiser and stronger because of these meetings. But let us go back to Baby and the dungeon and the homeless sitting around the fire...

*Here the tired stranger tells wonderful stories of his way which is full of dangers, adventure, happy discoveries and victories. "Oh Granddaddy, where do you get the strength to go over such long roads, to conquer enemies and to find new friends?" asked Baby. He answered, "You know, pretty child, it's true that there were moments when I was losing physical and spiritual strength and when I couldn't believe in myself and in the importance of my chosen way. At those moments my Magic Circle would help me. You know, I always have it with me.*

*"Will you show me your Magic Circle, please?" asked Baby timidly. The stranger smiled and pulled out of his old bag the Magic Circle. He held it for a second then handed it carefully over to Baby. Trembling, she looked at the ragged band. Yes, yes it was an old and worn and faded band. A tight knot connected its ends, making a circle from it. "Can you tell me the secret of your Magic Circle, Granddaddy?" Baby asked.*

*"A long time ago, when I was young, I decided to go my way all alone. The way of the Path of Life. It was very important for me to find out what is my strength and what is my weakness, what do I know already and what I need to learn; how I can help and what help I need. It wasn't an easy way. So my friends with whom I shared all the happiness and pleasure of my young life prepared me for the way. One of them gave me a feather and a piece of paper so I could send home messages. The other one gave me a little bag with a handful of soil so I wouldn't forget my Motherland. A third one gave me a dozen wheat seeds so I wouldn't die from hunger. And my closest and most trustworthy friend gave me a blue band. He gave it to me and asked me to tie its ends together with a tight knot. Thus, I had a circle in my hands. And my friends came into the circle and took the band in their strong young hands. And in their hands, the circle became alive. It became a sea and a raft, an abyss and a bridge, a shaft of burning sun and a tent. In my friends' hands, this circle became magic. It showed me what difficulties and obstacles were awaiting me on my way, and it showed me how I could overcome them. I keep the band as a most treasured thing. If you could only know, my dear girl, from how many problems this Magic Circle has gotten me out of! I'm strong only because of the precious gift of my friend."*

*"How lucky you are, Granddaddy! How important it is in life to have such friends and to deserve their precious gifts," Baby said. And suddenly, after saying that, Baby became very sad.*

*"I came today to your fire to give this blue band to you," said the stranger. "It has the color of your eyes; the color of a dream, the color of a bottomless sea and of an endless sky; and of a most delicate flower, the 'forget-me-not.' Take it, it's yours. The time will come when you, with your tender and strong hands, will tie its ends into a tight knot. And the band will become a Magic Circle that friends will join. They will join it to give you the power of kindness and love, to encourage your dreams and actions, to send you along the great path of knowledge and victory. And I know it will happen soon!" Saying that and leaving her no time to thank him, the old man disappeared.*

*There in the girl's hands was a blue band and it looked just like the one I have now in mine. What wonderful gifts life gives us. Just yesterday, Baby couldn't even think of happiness, and now, holding the gift from the old man in her hands, she felt strong...and the winged dreams started to form her Path of Life.*

*Many days have passed since then. Baby grew up and became a beautiful young woman. Her life was successful. And though her name wasn't in the newspaper headlines, it was often spoken with a sense of gratitude. She had a wonderful gift of kindness that warmed up the souls of those who needed that. And she kept as a talisman, the gift from the old man who changed her life so magically. And she always shared her story with anyone who would listen. The End.*

Tanya told me that she needs to get some new Raccoon Circles since the one she had been using was now Sveta's. She told me that Raccoon Circles make wonderful birthday gifts, because all of the people who are celebrating the birthday can put their wishes for the birthday person into the circle where the wishes will remain forever. With tears steaming down my face, I gave her seven pieces of blue webbing that luckily I had brought with me and told her they represented the seven directions and she was to use them as she needed. With tears on her face, we embraced. All of this happened through interpreters. We never know what gifts we give that will make a difference, what words we say that might leave an impact, or what touch or hug might give confidence and faith. The Raccoon Circle is bringing people together from all over the world, and it is making a difference.

"Every time we encourage people to 'circle up,' move through a series of activities and initiative problems and gather in the debriefing circle to share thoughts and feelings, we are giving them an opportunity to understand the need, the value and the joy of being fully human in connection with other people."

Tom Smith

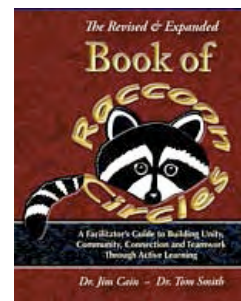
# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

## WHERE CAN I BUY RACCOON CIRCLES?

Tubular Webbing (the best kind of Raccoon Circle material) is sold in a variety of colors at outdoor stores that carry climbing equipment and supplies. You'll need 15 feet of webbing per Raccoon Circle. You can also find tubular webbing at horse tack shops, military surplus dealers and rope course builders. For lightweight webbing (less than 1" wide) check The Experiential Garage Sale at [www.teamworkandteamplay.com](http://www.teamworkandteamplay.com) and also check [www.training-wheels.com](http://www.training-wheels.com), [www.adventureworks.org](http://www.adventureworks.org) (Canada), [www.innotrek.com.sg](http://www.innotrek.com.sg)

## WHAT IS THE BEST BOOK OF RACCOON CIRCLE ACTIVITIES?

**The Revised and Expanded Book of Raccoon Circles**, by Jim Cain and Tom Smith, Kendall/Hunt Publishers, Dubuque, Iowa, USA (2007) ISBN 978-0-7575-3265-8 Available at: [www.kendallhunt.com](http://www.kendallhunt.com) or by calling 1-800-228-0810. This publication has over 200 games, team challenges, get acquainted activities, reviewing activities, stories and suggestions for using the Raccoon Circle to build unity, community, connection and teamwork in your group.



Raccoon Circles are included as part of The Ropework & Ropeplay Collection of Team Activities, designed by Jim Cain, and available from Training Wheels, Inc. This collection of 10 different ropes, webbings, strings and cord can be used to facilitate over 400 activities. Comes complete with a storage bag, extensive manual and a copy of The Revised and Expanded Book of Raccoon Circles. ([www.training-wheels.com](http://www.training-wheels.com))

## ARE THERE ANY FOREIGN LANGUAGE RACCOON CIRCLE DOCUMENTS/BOOKS AVAILABLE?

Yes! A Japanese translation has been published by LABO, the National Camping Association of Japan and the Girl Guides of Japan. For more information email: [raccoon-circles@labo-party.jp](mailto:raccoon-circles@labo-party.jp) Jim Cain also has a Taiwanese version of the internet edition of Raccoon Circles, and a Mandarin (Chinese) translation of the first Raccoon Circles book available. For more information contact him directly at: [jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com](mailto:jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com)

If you would like to see a Raccoon Circle document in your language (and would like to help with that project) contact Jim Cain. We'd love to see Raccoon Circle books in every language!



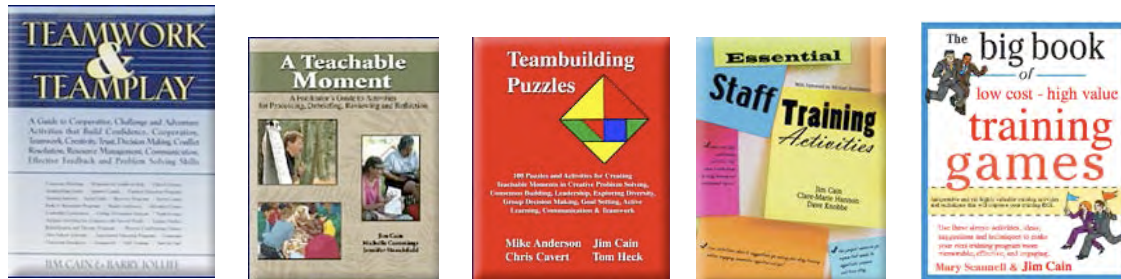
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# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

### WHAT OTHER TEAMBUILDING BOOKS BY JIM CAIN ARE AVAILABLE?

Teamwork & Teamplay, A Teachable Moment, Teambuilding Puzzles, and Essential Staff Training Activities are all available from Kendall/Hunt Publishing 1-800-228-0810 or [www.kendallhunt.com](http://www.kendallhunt.com)



New book projects by Jim Cain include: The Big Book of Low Cost High Value Training Games (with Mary Scannell) McGraw-Hill (2012), Find Something To Do! Kendall/Hunt (2012), It's All in the Cards! Kendall/Hunt (2013).

### WHERE CAN I GET TRAINING ON RACCOON CIRCLES AND OTHER TEAM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES?

You can find outstanding train-the-trainer programs by emailing Jim Cain at: [jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com](mailto:jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com) or calling (585) 637-0328.

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# RACCOON CIRCLES - THE WORLD WIDE WEBBING

## RACCOON CIRCLE CONTESTS

### PART I

Tom Smith's birthday is coming up, and it would be interesting to give him a world record for connecting up. All you need to do is see how many people you can get touching a single unknotted raccoon circle at the same time. Participants are allowed to contact each other during this process. A photograph (preferably digital), the location and the total number of folks connecting to one raccoon circle are all that is needed. So far, the unofficial record is 46 people. Can you break the record?

### PART II

Raccoon Circles are all about being creative and connecting. If you have a unique, original and fun raccoon circle activity (and you'd like to share it with the world), send it to: [jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com](mailto:jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com)

Each year, the best of the best will be chosen, and a prize awarded (which includes some great teambuilding books or props or outdoor gear). Let us know the name of the group, the location, your name and email address, a description of the activity (with a photograph if practical) and any other information you have, and we might just add it to this document and make you eligible for the yearly best of the best award.



I hope you enjoy this collection of Raccoon Circle activities, and that you will share this document with all your friends, business associates, teachers, trainers, facilitators, counselors, managers and anyone working with groups. Pass this document around (in digital or paper format) and help Raccoon Circles become the authentic 'world-wide-webbing.'

Jim Cain - 2011



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