

Practices of a Restorative School

Schools use restorative practices to build relationships among the school community to prevent bullying, disagreements, conflicts, missteps, mistakes or wrong-doing before harm happens. They are also practices schools use to help repair harm and provide a remedial response, which addresses the needs of the person or people hurt, holds the person or people who did the harm accountable, and engages the community in supporting both the person harmed and the person who did the harm. Community can be as small as a circle of classmates or as large as the community in which the school resides.

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The Practices

Restorative practices are formal and informal practices that transfer the restorative mindset into the daily lived experiences of school. The basic list of restorative practices explained in further detail in this document, include:

- Practices that develop the restorative mindset:
 - Intentional creation of community among adults;
 - Examination of one's own relationship to harm;
 - Explore implicit bias, historical trauma and resilience.
- Practices that build community:
 - Empathetic communication which includes listening with care and curiosity, and speaking using the language of feeling;
 - Circles to build and maintain relationships, to teach, to meet, to problem-solve, to provide on-going support.
- Practices that respond to harm:
 - Restorative questions used in a chat or conversations with one or two people;
 - Circle or conferencing with a group of people affected by harm, using the restorative questions.

These practices are used to build healthy relationships and to create community in school, to develop a positive school climate, prevent bullying and harm, and to help repair harm. A common misconception is that restorative practices is used only to repair harm between students. Restorative practices apply equally to everyone in the school community: students, adults, families and community members.

To have the greatest impact on school climate, an entire school community must be involved in and committed to the implementation of restorative practices.

Tiered Levels of Support for Students, Staff, Families and Community

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are a framework for systematically addressing the academic, social, emotional and behavioral developmental needs of students through the span of their pre-kindergarten through grade 12 education. Restorative practices (RP) in a school can be applied in multiple ways using the MTSS framework. Rather than focusing solely on a single student, restorative practices emphasize equally the needs of and support for all members of the school community, including adults.

Any practice can be a help or a hurt, depending upon the manner of the person using it. Therefore the foundation of a restorative school is the mindset of the adult. The first practices are with all the adults in the school community.

Foundation: Practices that build the restorative mindset for adults. At the foundational level, we recommend the following practices:

- Adults build community with each other by learning and using the circle process. They can promote a sense of belonging through staff and team circles, establishing norms or common agreements with each

school-based team after a discussion of values. In addition, belonging is supported by offering an orientation to RP with new staff members and by a review of staff policy language to ensure that staff have access to restorative practices as needed.

- Adults examine their own relationship to harm, through self-reflection, exploration and discussion with people they trust;
- Adults learn about and explore implicit bias, historical trauma and resilience.

Tier One: Practices that build community. At Tier One, we recommend the following practices:

- Adults can promote a sense of belonging by listening with care, curiosity, concern and empathy. They can listen without interrupting the speaker.
- Adults can promote a sense of belonging through applying a cultural understanding of eye contact and the use of physical proximity when they talk with students. Proximity includes walking together, standing side by side, or sitting so as to be at face-level with the student.
- Adults can model empathy through listening and speaking in a way that names feelings and keeps attention on the young person and their story. For example, “I feel excited for our new classmate to get to know us!”
- Adults and students use circle to ensure all voices are heard. The circle process can be used to build community in the classroom and in the staff room, to teach academic subjects, to address conflict in the classroom and to promote youth voice using youth-leadership circles.
- Adults and students can create teaching posters to reinforce the circle practice, the building or classroom values and the restorative questions. The materials for a circle—talking pieces, center piece, and the class’s circle community agreements—are visible and easily accessible.
- Adults can provide access and opportunity for families and community members to learn about RP through an RP newsletter, a video explaining RP, or an orientation to RP.
- Adults can engage family members in circle at parent- or family-teacher conferences, Individual Education Program (IEP) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, etc.

Tier Two: Practices that strengthen relationships in instances of conflict or at the first sign of harm. At Tier Two, we recommend the following practices:

- Adults use and model for students “I” statements, naming feelings and listening with empathy when there is conflict.
- Adults can help re-direct students or whole classrooms by circling up to review values or common agreements with the community.
- Adults can help address conflict by facilitating problem solving circles in the classroom or building.
- Adults can help repair relationships in the classroom by facilitating a restorative chat or conversation with one or two students, using the restorative questions.
- Adults can help repair relationships in the classroom by facilitating a small group conference with three or four students, or by keeping classroom circles so the students, teacher, educational assistants, support staff and other building staff can address conflict, difficulties or disruptions in the classroom or school.
- Students and family members and staff can all help address conflict or relationship difficulties by asking for a circle.

Tier Three: Practices that repair relationships in instances of harm. At Tier Three, we recommend the following practices:

- Adults, either district staff or community partners, can facilitate rebuilding relationships using either circle or conferencing to repair harm, family group conferencing, or a restorative process for re-entry. In setting up these processes, attention is paid to ensuring that the needs of the people affected by harm are addressed and that both professional, peer and familial supports are engaged.
- Adults and students prepare for conversations, circles, or conferences by identifying what the harm was, who was affected by it and what the needs are to be addressed. Participants are invited to repair harm and prepare for the repairing process.
- All members of the school community can benefit from repairing relationships: students and students, staff and students, staff and staff, staff and parents and family members, the school and the community.
- Adults and students who have facilitated or participated in restorative conversations, circles or conferences can debrief the repair-of-relationship processes, to ensure quality and to learn from difficulties.

Practices: Community and Relationship Building

Building community and relationships with and between students takes many forms. In their daily interactions, adults model relationship skills through how they listen to others, by expressing their own feelings, and in asking the restorative questions as a means of teaching empathy or to repair harm.

Communication is more than words used. Adults in a restorative school are aware of their non-verbal communication: body language, facial expression, tone of voice, movement (standing, sitting, walking and talking), eye contact (and their cultural meanings), gestures, posture, space, and touch. Any words can help or hurt, depending upon how we use them.

Empathetic Communication

In a restorative school, building community starts with the adults, who cultivate a restorative mindset of compassion for each other and for students, and a commitment to work with students and each other. Empathy is taught, modeled and reinforced, primarily through listening and speaking, using “I” statements that express feelings.

Listening is a basic building block of a restorative school. British restorative practices trainer and author Belinda Hopkins notes that valuing the speaker, having curiosity to uncover the many truths to a situation, having self-awareness and expressing interest in how someone feels are core elements of empathic listening.¹ Listening is the main practice of the circle process. Boyes Watson and Pranis point out that by giving everyone voice in circle, “...every perspective is valued as meaningful to that person.”²

All adults can help to teach empathy by using “I” statements that express feelings. “I feel delighted today because we are going on a field trip!” “I am a little tired today because my child was sick last night.” “I just love to teach quadratic equations!” These statements help to teach students the language of emotion, help adults

¹ Hopkins, B. (2004) *Just Schools: A Whole School Approach to Restorative Justice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 63-5.

² Boyes-Watson, C., and Pranis, K. (2015) *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*. Living Justice Press, St. Paul, MN, 23.

share who they are as people with students, and role model for students how to speak respectfully to others: “I feel frustrated because we used to be friends and now we don’t talk to each other.”

Empathy is the core element of a restorative process. To reinforce it, teachers can ask empathy questions during instruction in every subject:

- How do you think the character in this book or story felt when...?
- What do you think Martin Luther King felt before he gave his “I have a Dream” speech on the Washington Capitol Mall?
- How do you feel when you make a mistake in a calculation? Or when you miss a free throw? Or when you forget your lines in the play?

A school’s curricula may include explicit or embedded instruction for social and emotional learning (SEL). It is also true that the adults are teaching children how to express emotion every day and in every interaction, no matter whether they are a teacher, school staff member, custodian, principal, cafeteria professional or bus driver. All adults can help to increase students’ vocabulary for feeling words with simple expressions of their own feelings.

The Circle Process

A core practice for a restorative school is the circle process. Circle is a communication process. When holding circle, people sit so everyone can see each other. The order of talking is determined by the talking piece, which is an object of meaning for the group. The talking piece is sent around in order, and when a person has it, one can speak or pass without speaking, and when one does not have it, one listens. Topics are determined by the need of the group. In circle, people can “nurture healthy relationships”³ by working with each other. As the talking piece goes around, in order, the “vulnerable can be cared for, the marginalized are included”⁴ and everyone’s dignity and humanity is honored.

The circle process is an Indigenous practice. Kay Pranis wrote on the Living Justice Press website:

“What we understand as the “circle process” has been a part of the community life of Indigenous peoples around the world for millennia. And different Indigenous peoples have their own ways of conducting circle-type processes. Non-Natives who now use talking circles have, directly or indirectly, learned circle values and practices from Indigenous people. The process is endlessly adaptable to different situations and cultures. Non-Native Circle practitioners use elements that are culturally appropriate and comfortable for those in their group. This happens organically.”⁵

Circle can be a powerful means of mindful communication when used with all of the elements of the circle process: openings and closings, keeping, consensus and the talking piece. School-based circle practitioners say that circle provides a space where participants:

³ Evans, K and Vaandering, D., *The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.* 54.

⁵ Pranis, K. [What do we mean by Circle?](#) Living Justice Press Website, retrieved 7/24/2019.

- Get out of the head and into the heart.
- Listen deeply from the heart.
- Have no expectations.
- Provide emotional support.

No one watches circle because everyone is a part of the community. Anyone who wants to listen to a circle conversation can do so as a participant, so that all members of the circle know that everyone has agreed the community guidelines, which include confidentiality for personal stories and insights. Collectively, the group agreements ensures that everyone has the same stake in the process and that everyone is responsible for safety. In order to ensure that safety, everyone in the room must participate and engage.

In a circle process, power is shared and all people are included. Pranis and Boyes Watson write “The circle process helps individuals and the group experience healthy power in the presence of each other. Each person has voice; each person is valued; no one is more important than anyone else in the circle. Individual power in circle is self-determining—having voice, choosing whether to speak. Collective power in the circle is “power with”—decisions made by a consensus that does not privilege any point of view or position.”⁶

Types of Circles Used in Schools

The on-going community-building practice of the circle process (for instance, daily in the elementary school, three times a week in a middle school and weekly in a high school) provides regular opportunities to strengthen relationships between adults, between adults and students and between students.

By learning the language of feeling and empathy, and through practicing speaking and listening, turn-taking, problem-solving and storytelling, everyone in the school community gains experience with the skills they need to use in a conference or circle to repair if harm occurs.

In circle, people practice empathetic speaking and listening. Using circle regularly helps to build knowledge and relationships between students and students and students and staff. Circle is used in a variety of ways. Here are descriptions of different types of circle.

Community-Building Circle (pro-active circle): Regularly held, the community building circle helps students and adults gain new or deeper understanding of each other. Such a circle is done for staff development, or to help students get to know each other better. We suggest that you use these circles once a week in the high school, three times a week in the middle school and every day at the elementary school level. A circle helps participants slow down and open themselves up to the perceptions, insights and needs of others.

Circle to Teach: Improvisations of the circle process. Primarily dependent upon the common agreements for circle to encourage both participating and emotional and intellectual safety, and the use of the talking piece, circle to teach is used in academic settings to ensure that everyone in the class has access to multiple perspectives on content and their role as learners. The circle can be used at the beginning of a lesson to allow students to share their knowledge, perceptions, ideas and concerns related to the lesson. Circle is used at the

⁶ Boyes-Watson and Pranis, Circle Forward, 19.

end of a unit as a review for a test, or to allow students to reflect upon the unit and its impact on them. Feedback can be offered at this time to the teacher regarding activities and lessons.

Conflict Circle: These circles allow participants in the conflict and others affected by the conflict to gather together to share perspectives, needs and ideas.

Healing Circles: After crisis, trauma or harm, healing circles provide an opportunity for staff, students, families and the community to talk about what happened, how the harm affected them, needs they have and ideas they can share on how to move forward in a positive way. The circle has been used to provide processing time after student suicides and other deaths, crisis and other trauma.

Individualized Education Programs (IEP) Circles or Circles to support related Special Education processes: In an IEP circle, the use of a talking piece can help to bring a sense of equality to the process: introverts are encouraged to speak and extroverts are provided the opportunity to listen. The talking piece also helps to balance the school's capital and power to the family's gifts and wisdom. Even when a student is not able to be in the room physically to participate in the circle, using a talking piece that is of importance to the student can keep the student ever-present.

Repairing Harm Circles: Using the circle process, a facilitator engages people affected by harm in a three step process: pre-meetings to invite people to come together to address harm, the face-to-face circle facilitated by a trained keeper, and a celebration circle allowing everyone to recognize the completion of an agreement. Circles can also be used after a conference to reflect, affirm and support the agreement going forward.

Practices: Repairing Relationships and Harm

Repairing harm processes involve bringing together the person who caused the harm, the person harmed and other affected parties. Repair of harm processes include three steps:

1. Pre-meetings with all possible participants.
2. The face to face circle or conference.
3. A follow-up or celebration circle or post conference meeting.

To carry out the repair of harm processes, we recommend that facilitators and the circle keepers receive, at least, four-day circle training and a three-day training on the process they use. It's also important that they receive on-going coaching or mentoring as well as have opportunities to consult with another trained facilitator.

The names for restorative practices vary from community to community and country to country. When repairing harm, what you call the practice is not as important as how well you adhere to its values and principles. When assessing how to best repair harm, you may find it helpful to review what Zehr calls the "three pillars of restorative justice: harms and needs, obligations and engagement."⁷ To ensure that any practice is done to fidelity, it's important for facilitator and participants to attend to the three pillars.

⁷ Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, 22-25.

Harm and Needs: It is people and communities who are harmed, not discipline codes or a list of rules. Harm creates needs; first, tend to the needs of the person harmed, then to the needs of the community and then to the needs the person who did the harm.

Obligations: Wrongs or harms result in obligations. The person who did the harm has the first obligation: to make things right. Sometimes wrongs or harms also result in obligations to the community or the school. For instance, when addressing the obligations resulting from a fight in the locker room, school staff may agree to, in the future, ensure that the locker room will be supervised.

Engagement: This usually involves face-to-face meetings such as a circle or conference. However done, participants need to share their stories (verbally or with pictures), listen to each other and come to consensus about what needs to be done to make things right. A restorative process engages a larger circle of people than just the person who did the harm. The person or persons who were harmed and other affected people and the community also engage so as to have their needs addressed as well.

The Restorative Questions

In a restorative conversation or repair of harm process, people are asked variations of empathy questions:

- What happened?
- What were you feeling and thinking when that happened?
- What have you felt and thought since?
- Who has been affected by what happened? In what way?
- What impact has this incident had on you and on others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?

A restorative process, whether a conversation with the restorative questions or a circle or conference to repair harm, is voluntary. Participants are invited and they have choice to attend or not. If the person who has done harm decides not to attend, the regular discipline policy is used to hold them accountable.

The first question when something occurs is “What happened?” not “Why did you do that?” The question “What happened?” invites story and helps to open up communication, even if the topic is difficult to discuss. “Why” invites defensiveness and can shut down communication. Why also invites judgment and can be a pathway to implicit or explicit bias.

A restorative school uses an open-ended questioning process to provide support to the person harmed and support to the person who did the harm, as well as to the community affected by the harm. Variations exist based on this basic outline:

- What happened?
- Who has been affected and how?
- How can we put right the harm?

- What have we all learned so as to make different choices next time?⁸

The restorative questions are designed to help participants proceed through a process of ownership, empathy and planning and in doing so, gain self-awareness, other awareness and future awareness.

The restorative questions and repair of relationships processes can be adapted to meet the developmental ages and stages of children. Information about cognitive and emotional development is helpful in applying restorative questions. Key points include:

- It is normal for 4-5-year-olds (PK-K) to express emotions physically.
- Children in first to third grades are still learning to understand complex emotions. Their vocabulary may be limited to sad, mad, and happy, etc. Adults can help them understand other emotions, and emphasize that no emotions are bad. We can learn to recognize all of our emotions and respond in healthy ways.
- Children in grades 1-3 also may recognize the appropriateness of their behavior but many still struggle to control behavior in moments of dis-regulation. They may need adults to help teach them the skills to recognize when they are becoming dis-regulated.
- Children in early elementary are often not able to recognize other people's feelings at these ages, and need to be taught about this. They will likely not be able to name the impact their behavior has had on others.
- Children, ages 9 to 12 (grades 4-7), are developing the ability to recognize the impact of their actions. Creating shared values, goals and accountability with and to peer groups may be especially effective at these ages.
- Children in grades 4-7 are still not likely to be able to fully understand their own feelings and analyze why they feel a certain way.
- It is important to avoid putting an adult/punitive lens on situations where student actions may seem intentional but are more a result of an unmet need.⁹

Decision-Making: All Voices Heard

In a restorative process, decisions are made by consensus. As Howard Zehr writes, "Restorative justice prefers inclusive, collaborative processes and consensual outcomes."¹⁰ Involving everyone affected by the harm in deciding the best way forward helps to ensure that the plan is in the best interest of all the participants and partnered to reasonable, achievable actions steps. Boyes-Watson and Pranis define it this way:

"Decisions in the circle are made by consensus. The standard of consensus in a circle requires the decisions be one that every participant can live with. Agreements are typically recorded for clarity and for further reference. All Circle members are responsible for the successful implementation of the agreement."¹¹

A restorative process is a fair process, Thorsborne and Vinegrad note, which means that:

⁸ Hopkins, (2004). Just Schools, 29.

⁹ Need child development resource here.

¹⁰ Zehr, H. (2002) The Little Book of Restorative Justice, Good Books, Intercourse, PA, 26.

¹¹ Boyes Watson and Pranis (2016), Circle Forward, 32.

“...those most affected by the situation or incident are the best ones to decide how to go forward and how to reach a solution acceptable to everyone. This means we need to think more broadly about the issue of engagement. Who is to have a voice? Who has a stake in the outcome? How will we engage those most affected so that they experience the process as fair? What will be the focus of the problem-solving? Who decides what’s to be done?”¹²

Repair of Harm Practices

Restorative Dialogues (chats, conversations): These are in-the-moment or early intervention strategies where you use restorative questions with one to four people to address harm or relationship difficulties before they get more complicated. You can use restorative dialogues in the classroom, in the school hallway and on the playground if everyone involved agrees to do so.

Circle to Repair Harm: Using the circle process, a facilitator engages people affected by harm in a three step process: pre-meetings to invite people to come together to address harm, the face-to-face circle facilitated by a trained keeper, and a celebration circle allowing everyone to recognize the completion of an agreement. If needed, circles of support continue following the repair of harm process. The pre-meetings help participants reflect upon the restorative questions. The circle is organized around mutually agreed upon values, with everyone answering the restorative questions.

Conference to Repair Harm: Using a scripted process, a facilitator engages people affected by harm in a three-step process: pre-meetings to invite people to come together to address harm, the facilitated face-to-face meeting using a script or outline, and a follow-up meeting allowing everyone to recognize the completion of an agreement. The pre-meetings help participants reflect upon the restorative questions. The conference is organized around mutually agreed-upon values and everyone answering the restorative questions.

Family Group Conferencing: The Minneapolis Legal Rights Center has adapted restorative Family Group Conferencing for use in schools in response to significant behavioral concerns, as an alternative to expulsion, to support school re-entry following suspension, to address truancy, and/or to support family engagement. Through engagement of the student, family, school and community resources, a strengths-based accountability plan is developed to ensure that students are able to repair harm and that all parties help to restore the learning relationships between students and school, family and school, and student and family.

Circles for Re-entry: After a student has been excluded from the classroom or school, this circle brings together the student, the student’s family, the core teacher and an administrator to: support the student, make a plan to change the environment that contributed to the problems and repair harm.

Attendance or Truancy Circles: Truancy is best prevented with early identification of absences. An attendance circle is a process to invite and welcome the family as partners in the student’s education. By ensuring that all

¹² Thorsborne, M. and Vinegrad D. (2009). *Restorative Practices and Bullying: Rethinking Behavior Management*, Inyahead Press, Victoria, 9 & 10.

voices are welcome and honored, the circle participants work together to identify ways of supporting the student's learning and attendance before there is disengagement.

Similar to a family group conference, the truancy circle offers a place for the student to get help re-engaging with education and improving attendance at school. Possible circle participants could include the student's family members, elders in the community, the student's supportive peers and school staff. Human services agency staff may be invited to provide information and resources if the family needs extra support to help their child attend school. The emphasis of a truancy circle is on support and problem-solving.