

FORUM

Empowering the Next Generation: Restorative Practices in a Preschool

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I am a part-time assistant teacher at a preschool in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA. I'm instituting restorative practices with our 13-pupil class of four-year-olds. "Restorative" means participation by everyone affected by decisions, widening the circle, building social capital, separating the deed from the doer, and a focus on responsibilities and effects of actions, rather than blaming and labeling (Zehr, 1990; Wachtel & McCold, 2000).

We have a very healthy school with a few problems, such as disputes about sharing, turns to lead or speak and place in line, as well as exclusion, class disruption, complaining, arguing, running indoors, throwing, pushing and unsafe behavior. Assets include low pupil-teacher ratio and small class and school size.

My goals include: developing stronger relationships between pupils and teachers; helping pupils and teachers develop problem-solving techniques; giving pupils skills to work through conflicts (to express themselves clearly, set their own boundaries and reduce reliance on teacher intervention); and shifting teacher-pupil conflicts. My aim is to move teacher-pupil conflicts from power struggles, shaming and punishment led chiefly by teachers to problem solving-

focused conflict resolution methods and/or behavior consequences cooperatively achieved by teachers and pupils together.

In our school's traditional problem-solving procedure, a child brings a problem to the attention of a teacher, who then tells the "offending" pupil(s) to apologize. Pupils have learned to seek teacher intervention (rather than working it out) and to demand apologies. With repetition, pupils are learning other skills and processes for dealing with problems on their own.

I run circles in school daily. Topics include family, food, pets and things we are grateful for. Every day I facilitate a circle before lunch to make a transition for children staying for aftercare. I use circles regularly during lessons. I start some with a circle and usually end with children saying what they learned or liked best about the theme we discussed. We are also using circles to strengthen memory and reading comprehension and to review academic concepts.

In response to class-wide behavior problems, we have circles about "things I did well today and what I could have done better." On the playground, if pupils come to me to intervene and make rules or there is disagreement about which game to play, I gather a circle. Everyone says what game they want to play and why or what they have been wanting to say. I've found that a simple go-around about what people have on their minds diffuses conflict and whining, so children can return to their game without even reaching a solution together. The end outcome doesn't matter; usually the children don't even need to resolve the issue or decide what to do. Stopping and having them check in with one another is enough.

I use circles for children to brainstorm how to share or make an activity safer or to give responsibility back to the pupils when they ask me to intervene. After problem-solving circles, I find that I have to intervene less because pupils are holding each other accountable to the solutions they developed together.

Without prompting, the children are facilitating their own circles. They pick a talking piece, say, "I want to begin," or "I want to talk about 'X' today." They ask children who interrupt, "Who has the talking piece?" They also run circles without me. Once I was late to aftercare. When I arrived, the children had already held three circles without me and had enlisted another teacher to participate.

Children are initiating circles at non-routine times. At snack time, a child said, "Let's do a circle about when the board hit my head. I'll start: I was scared. Your turn," and passed her pretzel around. The children did the circle several times around on different topics and ate each other's talking pieces — an added dimension. Another day at snack time a child said, "I know! Let's play the talking game!" The children facilitated five circles — beyond their usual attention span.

I'm experimenting with reintegrating children back into the group when conflict occurs. When children come to me saying, "She pushed me" or "He's not sharing" or "His blocks fell on my head," I ask questions drawn from Shure (2000), Kohn (2005), Gordon (2003), Rosenberg (2003) and O'Connell et al. (1999).

In the case of harm, I ask what happened, how people feel about it and what we can do to make it better. This process has been helpful in restoring relationships

or restoring a child back to the group. (A child came to me with a conflict and asked me to “do the magic” again!) Sometimes children run off before I can finish the process or lie about what happened. Children may be used to an adult intervening and fixing the problem for them. Or perhaps they’re uncomfortable facing conflict and/or harm.

A child pushed another down, then refused to acknowledge what she had done. While I was facilitating a conference about what happened, how people had been affected and what could be done to make things better, the child who had been pushed stopped crying and gave the other child a hug and comforted her. This seemed to be an example of the power of conferencing in meeting a victim’s needs for emotional restoration and of the importance of victims in re-integrating offenders (Strang, 2001).

At times children who come to me with a problem don’t want me to fix it; they just want to be heard or reassured, or to receive some tools to figure it out for themselves. For example, a child who comes to me to tie her shoe may really want to talk about her upcoming birthday or her father’s hospitalization.

I try to make affective statements about how a child’s behavior is impacting me, instead of commanding them to change their behavior, using phrases that focus on impact: “Are you helping our class learn?” instead of “Be quiet,” and “Is that safe?” instead of “Don’t do that.” I sometimes tell the class “I have a problem. Who can guess what it is?” The children recognize the problem — “I know! We’re talking out of turn!” — and fix it. If a child tells me “Tom’s being too loud,” I ask, “What does that do?” When the child replies, “It hurts my ears,” I say, “OK, please tell Tom so he knows he’s hurting your ears.” Instead of intervening, I give a child an opportunity to focus on how he or she has been affected and to learn to set boundaries with others.

The most significant shift is that I’m focusing on people, rather than their behavior. If a child is running indoors, I’ll say to her, “Oh! You’re excited to come to school today!” and give her a hug, *then* ask her if she could use her “walking feet.” I am treating what might be called behavior problems that call for disciplinary action as opportunities for the children and me to work together and learn how to problem solve.

The children are also implementing the character development lessons I have been teaching (Shure 2000). I often hear them identifying their own or each other’s feelings. They make affective statements like “When you took my toy, I felt sad.” They are also able to identify opportunities for problem solving. They come to me and say, “L. and C. need help solving their problem!” When I introduce the circle topic “Did you have a problem today, and how did you fix it?” all the children are able to identify a problem and tell me how they fixed it, something they would not have been able to do two months ago!

Children outside my class are also learning about restorative practices. I facilitated a large circle with three classes that share the playground in which the children came up with rules to make the playground safe. Later that week, we held a circle to review the rules they had made and whether everyone agreed they could live up to those rules. One day when lunch was especially chaotic, the first-grade class tried to bring me into an argument about someone cutting in line. I had 10 other children to look after, so I told them to get in a circle and pass someone’s lunch box around and say what they had to say. It worked! Since then, if the first-graders are arguing and ask me to intervene, I put them in a circle and give them something to pass around. Though I only see this class during recess and lunch, I have used the circle process with them enough that they often respond

to a problem by saying, “Let’s pass a lunch box around and have a circle.”

I would like to use restorative practices so often that they become a habit, both inside and outside of my role as a preschool teacher. Our classroom will not be fully restorative until all adults are willing to participate in the processes. Adults can’t expect children to enact behavior that they are not modeling. Also, my class doesn’t exist in isolation. The more other classes are integrated into the model, the more likely it is to work.

I have especially been touched by how much I have learned from my pupils in this process. Their honesty, open-heartedness and enthusiasm during restorative processes, and their care for each other and me, have been very moving. ☉

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