

Working Restoratively in the Early Years

By Jane Langley, adapted by Bill Hansberry

langley.jane.m@edumail.vic.gov.au

www.hansberryec.com.au

It can be hard to see how Restorative Practices fits into the Early Years. It may be perceived that children of this age are not able to understand the script, still require a lot of *telling* and do not have the skills necessary to “fix up” the problem. A child’s ability to engage in restitution is of course a developmental consideration and varies child to child. This should never prevent adults who work with Preschool or Junior Primary children from establishing the essential foundations of Restorative Practices during these early years. Children learn to be responsible for their choices sooner when adults, whenever possible, try to do things ‘WITH’ them, rather than doing things ‘TO’ them, or ‘FOR’ them. When children cause one another upset through conflict or wrongdoing, adults have a choice; to take complete control of deciding what will happen to deal with what happened and not give children any say in the matter - do things ‘TO’ or ‘FOR’ the children involved, or, we can endeavour to give the children involved some say in the process, and work through the issue WITH the children.

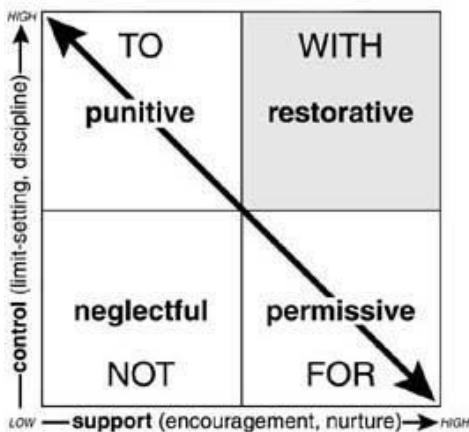


Figure 2: Social Discipline Window

The Social Discipline Window (Wachtell & McCold) illustrates that in working with young people, our management style can vary in two ways: we can offer high or low levels of support, nurturance and encouragement (or anywhere in between) The same is true for the levels of control, limit setting and discipline we exercise in our work with children – we too can be ‘high’, ‘low’ or anywhere in between. If we provide high levels of control, but very little support, our practice is likely punitive and authoritarian. If we provide high levels of support but fail to provide controls through setting boundaries and limits around behaviour, it is likely we are being permissive in our approach. If we offer no support and no control to children, we are being neglectful (not doing much of anything). If we are offering high levels of control as well as supporting children, we are being restorative.

Below are some thoughts which may help with the successful implementation of Restorative Practises in the early years:

Understand what the standard restorative script *looks like* for older students

Understand the structure and the agenda of taking responsibility for what has happened and fixing things up. When you understand the script then you can modify it. The restorative script has essential elements that are based on extensive and rigorous research. Modifying it without understanding it can diminish its effectiveness.

Early years teachers understanding of the basic restorative script is important because they are essentially doing the ground work with children around notions of win-win problem solving, narrative, developing emotional vocabulary, active responsibility taking and socially appropriate apology. Very important skills that are best learned young!

Restorative Practices – Strengthening the connections between relationships and learning

Keep things short and sharp

As teachers, we tend to over talk things! We make our point, then, we rephrase it to reaffirm our point. Choose the words carefully that you want to use. What is the message you want to give? Rather than adding more words to make a point – take them out. Make the message clear. Keeping things short and sharp is a crucial skill to develop as most of the kids we tend to deal with restoratively are boys. Too much talk causes confusion. Many of these children are not fast processors and *over talk* causes blockages in their understanding. (They hear blah, blah, blah) The same simple message needs to be given over and over, particularly with *repeat offenders*. Make it clear – “every time you...this is what will happen”

Model, Model, Model

RP is a developmental process that needs modelling, practise and rehearsal. When you ask children in year 3 upward, they generally have some ideas about what they can do to “fix things up”. Those harmed by others can also better verbalise their needs (what they think needs to happen to make things better); they understand the range of options. A child in the Early Years often needs to be taught these choices and skills. One example of this is leading children through what an apology looks like. Provide them with the lead in statements, explicitly helping them with what they can say. “I’m sorry for.....” “I didn’t like it when.....” / “when you... I felt.....” “I want you to stop...and start....”

Remember: Little kids don’t tend to hold grudges

Little ones ‘get over stuff’ – stuff happens, it gets sorted out, they move on. This makes working restoratively easier in one respect because little ones don’t hold their hurts for long. Being the centre of their own universe, they are not yet overly concerned about how their peers perceive them, so when someone does something that hurts them, they are not yet all that fussed about how this might make them look in front of peers – saving face is not a big concern, as long as an adult they have some attachment to can soothe them when they are upset, it is generally OK! Up until eight years of age an adult is the most significant person in a child’s life, and approval of significant adults is normally enough. After this, children turn more to their peers for affirmation of self, ‘am I OK, am I normal, am I a worthwhile person?’ This is also the age when reasoning skills develop, empathy is consolidated and female social cliques begin.

Little ones *feel worse* when an adult disapproves their behaviour

The fact that young children care much more about adult approval than peer approval has implications for working restoratively. **Restorative practice creates situations where wrongdoing is “shamed” by others.** In restorative processes, people get together and talk about how harmful a behaviour was, so those responsible *feel bad* about what they did and then use these shameful feelings as motivation to fix things up so they can be reintegrated – re accepted and seen again as a good and worthwhile person.

For older students, having a peer shame their behaviour is a very potent shaming experience, often more powerful than having an adult (teacher or parent) shaming their behaviour. This is why restorative conferencing becomes more successful from about 8 years or age onward. This is the time *the social blinkers, that keep children so self centred*, come off and the conference model of having their inappropriate behaviour rejected by their peers takes effect. Children want to be part of a group and from about 8 years of age onward begin to turn to peers, using them as a mirror to gain a *sense of self* through how others see them.

Before 8 years of age, building social connections may not be a conscious choice (as the world just revolves around them) so it fits that behaviour is rejected most successfully by adults in these early years.

Restorative Practices – Strengthening the connections between relationships and learning

The extended partnership between the parent and teacher in helping shape young people is critical in the early years

With younger children, being largely egocentric, shaming from adults they feel attached to will be much more powerful than shaming from other young children. Young children (being the centre of their own universe) are not yet hugely concerned with how other children see them, so having an adult explaining to them how their behaviour was not OK will carry more clout.

Young children also lack the language resources to verbalise their opinions and feelings about harmful behaviour, so as a result, adults often need to scaffold young children to express themselves so meaning can be made and understood.

This doesn't mean however that we don't let little ones hear from other children how they hurt or upset them – this is necessary for empathy building. The scripted restorative questions allow for the free flow of information and feelings about harm caused between those involved so empathy can develop. With every opportunity, we need to help young children understand that others too have needs and feelings and we can affect one another with our words and actions. This is the foundation of emotional literacy, civics and citizenship.

Give the kids the skills to solve problems themselves.

One of the traps of Restorative Practices can be for children to see teachers as the fix it people. This can also be the case in settings where restorative practices are not used and adults take complete control of deciding how wrongdoing should be addressed ('TO' or 'FOR' on the Social Discipline Window). In your Restorative chats with children, include questions such as: "Would you like me to help, or are you just letting me know?", "What do you think a good thing to do about that is?", "So what did you decide to do about...?" "What could you choose to do when something like this happens again?" "What do you want to happen now?"; "Did that make it better or worse?"

As teachers we can sometimes *over help* kids and explore problem solving with kids by controlling it ('TO' or 'FOR' on the Social Discipline Window). If we do this, we give kids the message that they are not capable of fixing things up themselves, often creating a sense of learned helplessness when it comes to problems and conflicts with others.

Train not retrain.

We often recognise early the children who are more than likely going to be our behaviour problems. Take the time in the early years to teach kids the skills and strategies of taking responsibility for their behaviour and of knowing how their behaviour affects others – then there is less retraining and less established habits later. Fences at the top of the cliff are much more effective than ambulances at the bottom!

Always remember, the three goals of discipline are:

1. To Keep children safe
2. To teach children social competence
3. To teach children to take responsibility for their actions

Behaviour management, behaviour development, behaviour learning (whatever you choose to call it) is an educative process – it's all about teaching, learning and mentoring. Discipline is a bank of knowledge about pro-social and culturally appropriate ways to conduct ourselves. If we can in preschools and schools be as purposeful in teaching young people how to be disciplined as we are in teaching them to read and write we will be on the right track!

Restorative Practices – Strengthening the connections between relationships and learning