

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

From Candy and Punishment to Celebrations and Problem-Solving Circles

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Norwood Elementary, a Title I science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) school in Baltimore County, MD, recently realized that traditional behavior management programs and processes were not working with our students. Over time, we discovered more successful approaches, and restorative practices became our way to transform the culture and climate to one of enduring peacefulness, persistence, grit, and compassion. The data below helps prove we are on the right track.

This past school year, our behavior interventionist kept track of the following trends and documented the numbers. We then analyzed this data:

- 55% decrease in office referrals;
- 49% decrease in time missed from instruction;
- 55% decrease in physical aggression;
- 97.7% of students feel safe in school; and
- Over 20,000 minutes back in classroom compared to last year.

We asked ourselves the following questions:

- Do restorative practices change behavior?
- Do restorative practices foster a peaceful culture in a school?
- Can we improve in the area of behavior management using restorative practices?

THE RATIONALE

Norwood STEM Program is an innovative, 21st century, restorative-practice school. Norwood is a Title I school with a diverse population of 520 students. The families want better for their children and support the academic program. The children want to go to college because of our many connections with Towson University.

The challenge for our community was the switch to restorative practices in place of rewards and punishment. We are a school try-

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ing to make a difference for our population, one that is lasting and has effects beyond the walls of our schoolhouse. Many parents, teachers and students have fixed mindsets on traditional behavior management. These are hard to change, but at Norwood we are starting to change mindsets. Our students are immersed in a collaborative community of problem solvers. We embrace mistakes as a natural part of child development and provide a toolkit of resources through our character education programs. Furthermore, we do not believe in teaching character in isolation, but we infuse it throughout the curriculum, school day and every possible aspect of our culture. Students collaborate daily, working in small groups in the classrooms to build relationships. The teachers work on building relationships with our parents and students. We work hard to make a large school into a village, family and team.

Norwood institutionalized restorative practices as the behavior plan to change the culture. Instead of rewards and punishments, there is a support system, problem solving process and virtuous ways to communicate all that we learn and practice. We live by the peace code with empathy, persistence, grit, compassion, self-control and zest to guide us.

Seven years ago, a book, *Choice Theory* by William Glasser, arrived. We intensely embraced the mission of meeting our students' needs of survival, love and belonging, freedom, power and fun. This was our breakthrough telling us that we needed to change things when it came to discipline. We put kids' needs first in our decision making in how to interact with all students, especially stress kids.

We had consistent, theoretical, and practical training with continual debriefing after practice, support, creative brainstorming, and critical analysis of what was working and what wasn't. We all became action researchers. We took ownership of learning our students' needs and which strategies best met those needs. We took good care of our kids.

While we were taking care of our students' needs, we were missing out on the teaching focus. What did they need to learn to be responsible for their behaviors? So, we embarked on learning responsibility-centered discipline.

Teachers practiced identifying the Give 'Em Five strategies of supporting, expectations, breakdown, benefit, and closure from Larry Thompson, a responsibility-centered discipline guru, when interacting with students in crisis or when a problem occurred. This was done with the student who caused the problem to learn what to do next time.

We learned a lot about what caused their anger and set out to be more proactive with the compass of shame with our students. On the compass of shame students identify their reactions to making mistakes. It could be attacking themselves, attacking others, withdrawing or avoiding. Why did they do what they did? How could we help them?

We had diversity training, culturally responsive sessions, behavior specialists' best advice and other productive training. Then a teacher, Darrielle Sarnovsky, taught us how to do justice circles. She hoped that these circles were the key to empowering our students to authentically problem solve and own their problems, as well as solutions and apologies.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: THE VARIOUS CIRCLES

There were more stressed kids than ever in our school. They needed help. We needed to do more. We had a great foundation on building character and many strategies under our belt, but we needed just the right intervention to bring peace to our school. Could justice circles be that answer?

Not all were receptive or willing to try. Many shook their heads saying "Extrinsic rewards work. We need stickers and treats to encourage better behaviors." "Students need to learn from their mistakes with punishment. They won't do it again because they don't like

punishment.” This wasn't working with our students. So, with hesitation and resistance, we began our intensive learning of restorative practices.

We started with one teacher doing justice circles. Darrielle did demos. She had her students lead circles in other classes. She did a circle demo for each grade level with their grade level students. She taped her class doing a circle for resource viewing.

We needed more training. We found restorative practice workshops, and we had 13 teachers attend with us. We learned together how to implement and improve with all kinds of circles. The key to our growth here was our discovery that students needed to learn how to problem solve. Developing and implementing problem-solving skills changed our school. Empathy developed. Kindness permeated. Communication strengthened. Physical contact decreased. Respect and responsibility became common. The feeling and look of the school changed right before our eyes. After 4 years of crafting and molding our approach to restorative practices, we evolved into our very own peaceful school society, community, team, family. Our students say, “We have two families, a school family and home family.”

The journey involved researching and piloting for a year. We did lots of exploration and then had those who piloted become leaders. The second year was devoted to making everyone aware of what restorative practices was and what it looked like. That year was critical in building stamina, confidence and support we needed to transform from rewards and punishment to support and problem solving. We needed 100% buy in and did not have it. Training increased. Data collection showed improvement. Traditionalists kept holding on to what provided immediate compliance. We wanted enduring changes in behavior. Learning something that becomes part of your being takes time, practice, understanding and change in mindset. The third year brought more teachers on board. Teachers continued with training and implementing circles, along with a variety of professional development opportunities to

strengthen our practices. We even had visitors observe our practices, which definitely built our confidence, comfort, self-esteem, and appreciation for the several character changes that were becoming visible and lasting. The fourth year, last year, was our sustaining year. The entire faculty was trained, committed to the practices and were persistent with student support and the practices. While some teachers have moments of doubt, we collaborate and problem solve to renew their energy and grit in doing the practices, while celebrating their students' progress.

Community Circle

Every day the community of students starts the day of learning with a circle. They are greeted at the door as they enter the classroom, knowing that they will greet each other, share, look at successes and challenges and reflect on their class and individual goals. Students have 10-20 minutes to set their tone for the day. The camaraderie, positive comments, questions, and needs met make the day begin in comfort, confidence and hope.

We follow this simple plan:

1. Greeting: Students respectfully welcome each other by name;
2. Sharing: Ask a question or give a prompt;
3. News: Updates of day, successes, and challenges; and
4. Goals: What do we need to do differently to achieve our class goal? How can we help each other with individual goals in reading levels? Develop plans for kids helping kids achieve goals.

Justice Circle

When a problem occurs, students gather in a circle to solve it. At the start of the year, students become a school family by solving problems together and learning how to do it. As the year progresses, the students learn to do small circles with each other building trust and empathy. Learning to problem solve effec-

tively is a critical life skill. Everyone needs to know how to make sincere apologies. When one apologizes, it sounds like this: "I am sorry for _____. The next time, I will _____. Do you accept my apology? Is there anything else I can do to make it better?"

We follow this procedure:

1. What happened? Get multiple perspectives.
2. What were you feeling/thinking?
3. Who has mainly been harmed?
4. What can be done to repair the harm?
5. Are you ready to move forward? Clean slate.

In traditional problem solving, the focus is on who was to blame. This was done so that person would get the consequences he deserved. The thinking was to find an appropriate response to deter and possibly punish those at fault, so they will not do the same thing again. In justice circles, the students are supported and understood, focusing on having a support system when you make a bad choice or a mistake. We normalize mistakes and prevent a shame response so students can learn without acting out. We want to empower students to take responsibility and to repair the harm. What can they do next time so no one gets hurt?

Academic Circle

Discussions and skill reviews are great when done in circles. Students can be given a question to answer. Students can look at each other and agree, disagree, add on, question or piggyback responses. Students can have a closing circle at the end of each learning session sharing what they learned. A new skill can be reviewed with students giving examples while others give a thumbs-up or down. Students want to see each other as they share ideas, and they listen better when they look at the speaker. This method greatly increases engagement.

Faculty Circle

We always sit in a circle at faculty meetings. This way we are all united, attentive, and focused. When you can see everyone, you connect on a higher level. Teachers build stronger relationships with teachers at other grade levels and learn from each other just like their students. This contributed to faculty buy in for restorative practices. They were doing what they expected of their students.

Family Circle

When a single student has an issue the teacher partners with the parent to develop solutions and future plans. When two or more students have conflict, it makes sense to bring the two students together with their parents to do the same. Involving the entire family has increased communication, intensified our class unity, built parent relationships and extended the justice circle into the family arena.

Parents, who are at first hesitant to attend, leave hugging and shaking hands with each other. Of the 14 family circles we held last year, we can proudly say that none of the students who participated in the family circles had repeat issues due to these productive and meaningful circles.

Virtues Language

How do we communicate with students, parents and each other while encouraging character building? How do we instill the virtues everyday so it is part of our culture and existence? Students need a toolkit for problem solving.

Dara Feldman taught us virtues language. She showed us how we state our expectations using virtue language. It is the way you say something that makes a difference. We adapted it as a tool for restorative practices and use this language for problem solving. Instead of "Finish your work," say "Please show determination by finishing your task." Instead of

“No running!” say “Please show orderliness by walking in the hallways.”

You must consciously practice the language until it becomes comfortable. Soon, students are mimicking your requests with each other. Soon the students understand and use virtues in their problem solving and interactions with others.

Practice What You Preach

Students and teachers need to practice and live these skills. The whole school community comes together to practice, celebrate and update our restorative practices. We keep growing together thus building strength in how we resolve conflict and keep peacefulness in our school.

Problem-Solving Factory

Each month Mike Gorecki, our behavior interventionist, coordinates grade level opportunities for students to collaboratively solve problems. Kendra Powell, guidance counselor, would post actual situations that occurred in our school for students to resolve. The students would read the problem, give suggestions and then act it out with the solution.

Virtue Assemblies

We like to come together as a community to celebrate. Every celebration that becomes a learning experience validating character education and restorative practices is vital. Mike Gorecki creates 20-minute assemblies focused on virtues and character building. They are sometimes like a pep rally and sometimes video clips. Sometimes the videos are online, and many times Mike tapes the students demonstrating the virtue. Needless to say, everyone likes seeing themselves or their friends doing good things.

Topics and focus for some assemblies we have initiated include:

- Antibullying: Students pledge to not be a bully and to speak up for others;
- Zest: Students learn about “ingredients” to make friendship soup;
- Grit: Students watch video clips and role play how to show grit; and
- Paying it Forward: Students write letters for kids in the hospital, bring a can good for the food shelter, or tape songs for the elderly. At the assembly, we invite representatives to speak on behalf of the good deed: a hospital rep to talk about how the cards cheer up the kids, someone from the food shelter and the neighborhood senior center. One time, several teachers and I grew our hair for cancer victims and had it cut and donated at the assembly. We showed a video from the representative at Pantene and had four long locks to donate.

Clubs

Our clubs always have a virtue focus and mission. Every year, we start new ones based on the students’ ideas for clubs they want. We also have clubs that continue each year. Our constant clubs are: Business, Music and Movement, Environmental and Friendship. Students learn business ethics and grit, showmanship and teamwork, creativity, helpfulness and purposefulness, and so much more.

Civic Projects

This is one we are working on improving. We have done several civic projects based on a need we know. The whole school works together. We want to infuse helpfulness, care and kindness into our daily routine. This year, all classes will research and analyze the needs of our school and community and even the world to decide how we can help. Heather Swinder, third-grade teacher, did this last year. Her students did a needs assessment of the school and came up of a list of how they could help. They posted the list and worked on “how” every minute they had. They wrote let-

ters to Home Depot to get new basketball nets for the basketball court. They did weekly trash walks. They were vigilant in finding the need and getting a solution together!

Parent Engagement

Every month, Stacey Wade, parent support coordinator, organizes a parent breakfast. Topics are based on parent needs. Surveys are given and used to plan the focus. On this year's survey, the highest percentage was character building. So, our breakfast will demonstrate a community meeting and having parents transfer this structure to family meetings at home. Parents have seen demos of justice circles, received information in the parent bulletin, have books to lend and read, and had classroom visits to see responsibility and orderliness grow in their child's classroom.

Norwood STREAM Project Bus

The Norwood STREAM Project bus is "learning on wheels." We take a bus through our students' neighborhoods for additional projects and lessons, including the parents. We go to them to make it easier for the families to get involved. It is another opportunity to modify the learning environment to be extraordinary. It is a place where learning goes to the community. It is a way to spend family time together experimenting. It is an extension of the learning at school. It is a place to reinforce difficult skill development and make better plans for home learning. It is a different and fun place to learn. It takes the village to make the bus run effectively and efficiently with the learning component.

We market and publicize each weekly ride, creatively rallying all the students and parents to come to the bus. We select an experiment, and a teacher facilitates it with the students. We create parent stations and situate them on the long table bar in the bus while children are doing the experiments. Parents stand and learn, while students sit and learn at benches. There is a booth in the back of the bus to talk with every parent about any needs or issues. Parents

have learned how to do a homework schedule, how to solve problems, how to communicate with their children.

The behavior interventionist conducts circles at the bus stop if anyone needs one. He helps kids and their parents problem solve and plan family activities. We make sure all the materials and experiments are ready to go each week. We all connect informally with our families every time we go on the bus. We learn about their needs and concerns and are able to address them on positive ground and in an efficient manner.

A Plan That Works

When we began, we could not observe the practices at other schools. We learned through trial and error. We practiced something and then made improvements. If it did not add to the learning and growing, we either modified it or did not do it. We learned so much from our social investigation. We learned strength through this struggle.

The learning is growing beyond our school. We share our successes and failures with other schools in our district. We are happy to show other schools what we learned and value. Seeing is believing. It brings the theory and teachings to life, something concrete to hold on to when the going gets tough. The result of change is the peace you get after battling all the obstacles to reach your own personal success with the new approach. The end result of restorative practices is peace in the school for teachers, students and parents. It was one of our greatest challenges at Norwood, and we see and feel the peace when we are at school. Visitors have shared that same feeling when they are here.

We continue to sustain restorative practices more and more each year. We continue to grow and get better at our problem solving skills and restorative practices. We see the transformation in behavior, attitudes, friendships and culture. We love what we are doing to change from good to great with our collaborative, peaceful, caring community of problem solvers.