



From Punish and Discipline to Repair and Restore

Promoting restorative justice in the early childhood classroom.

By Erica Lawrence and Tracy Hinds

Two third-grade students are fighting during lunchtime in the cafeteria. The students are suspended from school for three days. When they return to school, the teacher scolds them and directs them to take seats in the back of the room.

Two preschool students are wrestling in the classroom. The teacher writes the third disciplinary referral that day for disruptive behavior.

A kindergarten student arrives at school and waits in the loud, crowded gym until dismissed to the classroom. Once in the classroom, the student is agitated and begins screaming at peers.

Misbehavior by our youngest learners is a serious challenge school districts and schools face. According to “Patterns of Minor Office Discipline Referrals in Schools Using SWIS” by Cody Gion and his University of Oregon colleagues, students age 3 to grade 3 represent the majority of low-level discipline infractions within entire school districts. And in “Prekindergartners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Programs,” Walter Gilliam found that the pre-kindergarten expulsion rate is triple the K-12 rate. Positive behavior interventions and restorative justice practices can decrease the intensity and frequency of misbehavior, increase instructional time, improve student academic achievement, and enhance the school culture and climate.

In many instances, the principal’s office has become a revolving door of student discipline issues and Band-Aid solutions. How can schools reduce disciplinary infractions and keep students at the epicenter of learning? Schools need powerful tools to shape culture and reduce misbehavior.

Paradigm Shift

Far too many students spend time outside the classroom as a result of educational leaders implementing exclusionary approaches as discipline. Imagine what a learning environment would look like if we fostered a culture where students were proactive and involved with maintaining reconciliation. Now imagine students being encouraged to participate in dialogue that leads to understanding and accountability of students’ behavior. Next, visualize a culture consistently engaging in decision-making practices that closes the discipline gap while achieving positive behavioral and academic outcomes. These depictions illustrate effective repair and restore strategies supported by a transition toward restorative justice practices.

Restorative justice identifies student misbehavior as a student inflicting some level of harm toward an individual or property. In “Restorative Justice in Schools: The Influence of Race on Restorative Discipline,” Allison Payne and Kelly Welch suggest the defining characteristics that differentiate restorative justice from traditional punitive practices is the emphasis on restoring and reconciling relationships. Retributive justice, as opposed to restorative justice, functions as a tool to punish with a focus on the offender.

According to your district’s code of conduct and policies, there are violations that warrant suspension to ensure the safety of the school community. These violations can range from bullying to possessing a weapon. Restorative justice practices facilitate healing and restoration of relationships, while including a focus on the harmed individual. A restorative justice approach to these violations would be to develop a plan requiring the student to be held accountable by facing the person harmed to assist with reconciling the relationship.

Restorative Justice and Young Learners

Restorative justice is more sophisticated than a program; it is a culture. It is a cultural norm that must be explicitly taught within the classroom, in professional development activities, in family/community newsletters, and at events. Retributive justice trends facilitate an expectation within the school community that violation of the code of conduct will result in punishment and suspension. Through restorative justice, school communities learn that alternate accountability measures result in the reduction or elimination of suspensions and an increase in student engagement and belongingness.

Restorative justice principles are more challenging to implement within early childhood classrooms because of student-limited oral fluency of our emerging language learners. So give students opportunities to use both images and words to express themselves. Speech/language pathologist and general education co-teaching can support the overall language fluency of all children.

Students enter our schools with various levels of exposure to rich vocabulary and oral language. Communication is an essential strategy to restorative justice. Teachers must use classroom spaces to communicate and identify behavior expectations. They should



PRE-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

Black children make up 18 percent of the total preschool population, but make up 42 percent of those suspended once, and 48 percent of those suspended more than once, according to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights.

Restorative justice practices

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display visual representations of classroom culture themes and use them as teaching tools. And in classroom communication, teachers should use vivid vocabulary and give students opportunities to demonstrate expressive and receptive language skills. Teachers can expose students to vivid language by engaging in daily read-aloud activities and modeling expected behaviors through role-play scenarios. Additionally, teachers should be proactive and request support from speech language professionals early on to provide strategies with developing oral language. Restorative classroom communities take care not to create outcasts and facilitate isolation or exclusion of misbehaving students by using inclusive language.

Educators should be careful about misinterpreting and miscommunicating bad behavior. For example, wrestling or rough play is necessary for children, but the behavior can be interpreted as fighting or defiance by adults and subsequently punished. In such cases, communicate with students that wrestling can become unsafe and that we have safe opportunities to use our entire bodies. In the 2011 article “Rough Play: One of the Most Challenging Behaviors,” Frances Carlson suggests rough and tumble play activities such as playing Red Rover, rolling on yoga balls, and climbing large play equipment as effective preventative measures. Indicators that rough

and tumble play has turned to fighting include children striking with a closed fist, tense muscle tone, and rigid facial expressions.

Planning and Preparing for Misbehavior

Students are going to misbehave. Plan for it by anticipating behaviors, teaching positive behavior, and cultivating restorative practices to repair harm and restore relationships. Planning for misbehavior can reduce the frequency and intensity of acting-out episodes. Where are “misbehavior hot spots”? When does misbehavior occur? What is the most common infraction? Who has the most intense behavior needs? The responses to these questions can help guide your behavior preparation plan.

Prepare teachers for behavior instruction.

Teachers create learning opportunities for academic subjects each day. We must also create learning opportunities for behavior and prosocial skills each day. Schools must adopt a behavior curriculum and identify specific implementation logistics. Designating a specific time of the day for behavior/social skills instruction across the school will ensure that behavior instruction becomes a Tier I core instructional practice within the behavioral pyramid of interventions. Tier II behavior instruction includes small-group behavior instruction. Bus Safety School—a class offered before and after school to review bus expectations—is a highly recommended alternative to suspensions that teaches expected behaviors to address low-level bus infractions. Use of Bus Safety School avoids retributive justice punishment, thwarts more severe bus behavior, and increases our instructional time with a student.

Prepare for the sensory needs of early childhood learners. Be mindful of school spaces that are visually overstimulating, unstructured, or crowded, or late afternoon activities when young learners are becoming fatigued. Look for solutions to remove these sensory challenges. Consider arranging lunch with a small group in the counselor’s office because the unstructured cafeteria is difficult; a morning school job in the computer lab because the loud gymnasium can cause anxiety; or blank wall space above student eye level for a calming effect—these are all magical solutions for students who struggle with sensory overstimulation.

Prepare for the therapeutic needs of early childhood learners. Create space within the school for children to de-escalate and review behavior strategies. Sample terms for this space



include positive action center, rage room, or opportunity room. This space should be used by a trained adult who can support student crisis episodes and positive re-entry into the classroom. It facilitates individualized Tier III instruction, therapeutic support, and student/staff relationships as opposed to retributive punishment and stigmatized shaming. Additionally, this instructional setting does not detract from other children's opportunities to learn or teacher's ability to teach.


Staff Development

All staff members working with students and families must demonstrate competency in de-escalation and positive communication. Train teachers and instructional assistants and provide ongoing coaching in the areas of classroom management, developing classroom procedures, implementing student behavior plans, and executing the behavior curriculum. Teachers and instructional assistants must also facilitate behavioral instructional strategies with students, including oral fluency development, behavior- and emotion-themed book studies, and community circles/restorative circles.

Tier staff professional development based on staff needs. Classroom management and relationship-focused professional development should occur within Tier I core instructional practice for staff. School leaders should select

professional learning materials and identify when and how this learning will be implemented. For staff members who struggle with classroom management and relationships, provide them with more intensive learning opportunities, including small-group and individual instruction.

Excellent staff developers may already be in your local school; school counselors, social workers, and assistant principals may be a natural choice. But nutrition, health services, clerical, or teaching staff members with exceptional relationship skills also can model and facilitate relationship learning opportunities. Look beyond titles, and take into consideration a staff member's temperament and relationships when identifying individuals who can support a positive school culture for all.

Early childhood education is our first opportunity to develop ethical and caring human beings and achievement for every learner. Restorative justice and positive behavior interventions facilitate student access to every available instructional moment, thus ensuring success for today and a lifetime. 

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