

SEFTON CENTRE FOR RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: HEADING FOR A RESTORATIVE COMMUNITY

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The government green paper of 1998 led to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. In turn, this promoted the creation of Youth Offending Teams (YOTs).

There are 154 multi-agency YOTs under the guidance of the Youth Justice Board in all of the local authorities in England and Wales, made up of representatives from probation, education, social services, health and police. Their principal aim is to stop and prevent young people from committing offenses by providing programs and interventions to both the court and the young offenders themselves.

A borough with a population of about 287,000 on the northwest coast of England, Sefton is quite diverse, encompassing some of the most deprived communities in northern Europe, such as Bootle, as well as very affluent areas, such as Formby and Southport. Many of the restorative practices efforts have focused on the more disadvan-



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tagged areas, including work in the schools.

In 2003 the Sefton YOT secured funds to create the Sefton Centre for Restorative Practices (SCRP). The aim of the center was to repair harm caused to people and communities brought about through conflict. The center may be the only building in the UK dedicated to restorative practices.

The SCRП team consists of program manager John Gibbens, two development workers who are responsible for rolling out restorative practices within educational settings, Mark Finnis and Paula Downes, and a restorative justice facilitator, Paul Moran, who is responsible for the delivery of a range of restorative interventions. Paul and Mark are also responsible for the delivery of the training and the promotion of restorative practices within Sefton. Two victim support workers, Sylvia Bouqdib and Sharon Jones, attempt to contact every victim of a youth crime within the area. We also have administration support from Carla Cunningham.

The SCRП has a goal—to create a restorative community.

The SCRП provides services for its parent agency, the YOT. There are obvious applications for restorative practices within the criminal justice system. We offer conferences for those harmed by crime and those who have committed the criminal act. These meetings have produced some very powerful interactions, with victims reporting an overwhelming rate of satisfaction with the service delivered. They note that they are pleased to have an opportunity to ask questions of those who have harmed them and to be able to have a voice in the justice process. Our conferences have covered issues from deaths to the theft of a pencil and everything in between. The core issue is often a sense of loss and how individuals deal with the effects of their experiences. “Courts deal with crimes as a matter of fact and evidence, with little or no regard for the emotional consequences of the crime” (Wachtel, 1997).

About 65 percent of the work of the YOT concerns referral orders. Referral orders are assigned to first-time offenders appearing in court and pleading guilty. Young people are sentenced by the magistrate, who sets the duration of the

order based on the seriousness of the offense; this can be anywhere between three and 12 months. The content of the order is negotiated with the young person, with input from community panel members and from victims, who can attend in person if they wish.

Referral orders within Sefton and the UK, while not perfect, have gone a long way toward meeting the needs of victims. “Our criminal justice system places greater emphasis on the needs of the offenders than those of the victims because many of its practices developed out of concern for protecting the accused” (Wachtel, 1997).

For those young people who are coming to us on other court disposals, we have devised a system of initial planning meetings (IPMs). These meetings are again based on restorative principles including the young person, their family and a range of services provided by the YOT to negotiate the content of the young person’s contract. All decisions taken during this process are agreed upon by everyone at the meeting.

We provide family group conferences and restorative family-focused conferences for incidents within families. Conferences often fulfill a family’s need to communicate with each other again; children need to be heard by their parents and parents need to be heard by their children.

The development of the SCRCP continues into other areas of work as opportunities arise. We take the view that we need to expand into other areas in order to promote the benefits of restorative practices. As we meet resistance in one area we take a fluid approach to continue work in other service areas.

We not only work in Sefton, but we also live with our families here, and our children are educated in this community. What does community mean to Sefton?

We see restorative practices as something that might help bring back that sense of community, by improving communication, improving responsibility and holding people accountable. Restorative practices provide opportunities for real people to share real experiences about how they have been affected

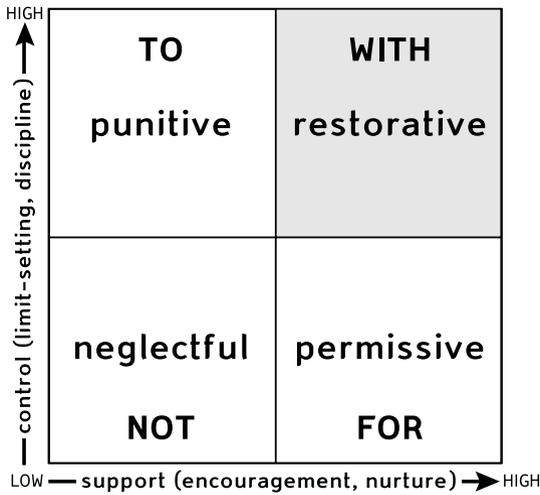


Figure 1. Social Discipline Window

by incidents of wrongdoing and confront the wrongdoing full on. “Above all, restorative justice is an invitation to join in conversation so that we may support and learn from each other. It is a reminder that all of us are indeed interconnected” (Zehr, 2002).

In line with Wachtel’s Social Discipline Window (Figure 1), where he discusses four approaches, including the words TO, FOR, NOT and WITH, we decided that our community had four choices in terms of how they wanted to work and live. The question was, which box did they want to exist in?

We quickly realized that if we were going to make a difference in our community, then the scope of the work was going to have to become much greater.

We had the remit to work in two schools in Sefton to develop a whole-school approach to working restoratively, to develop the use of restorative practices in partnership with the Sefton Centre. These two schools were designed to be our two pilot schools.

Through the work in these two schools, we quickly realized that to have a substantial impact on the education system in

Sefton, we needed to think bigger. There are 109 schools in Sefton and all of them have needs. If we were going to work restoratively in the truest sense, we had to be inclusive and fair with all the schools in Sefton.

We work with multi-agency groups and partnerships with the same funding stream. Word quickly spread about the benefits of using restorative practices. The SCRPs began to gain a reputation for providing an effective and valuable service, which opened doors and provided opportunities that had previously not existed. “Restorative practices are contagious, spreading from workplace to home” (O’Connell, Wachtel and Wachtel, 1999).

We recognized that there was conflict and a breakdown in relationships in other areas of our community. We also started to realize the full extent that restorative practices could have on Sefton, our community.

Restorative practices are proving a success at schools across Sefton, where staff have discovered that discipline works more effectively when the children are included in the process.

Schools often struggle with persistent problems of bullying, violence and generally poor behavior among their pupils. Pupils often shy away from taking responsibility and try to blame others for their actions. “Blaming others for the incident often reflects an underlying feeling of shame” (O’Connell, Wachtel and Wachtel, 1999).

Conventional punishments like detentions and suspensions didn’t seem to help. Once children get into a pattern of antisocial behavior and are punished at school, it usually lends itself to further alienation. “There is no one ‘truth’ about a given situation, there are only truths. Everyone has their own experience of a given situation” (Hopkins, 2004).

We have introduced restorative approaches to discipline that encourage students to talk about and reflect on their behavior, take responsibility for their actions and find ways to “make things right” with those they have hurt. Schools like the idea that children and young people are encouraged to face



Students at St. James Primary School participate in a restorative circle facilitated by Mark Finnis, restorative justice development officer at the Sefton Centre for Restorative Practice.

PAPERS

the consequences of their actions, meet face to face with those they have harmed and do something to make things better.

This approach encourages school staff to think about their relationship with their pupils, advocating a “firm but fair” approach, with a high level of control and discipline but also plenty of support and encouragement.

We use the “magic questions” at the heart of all restorative interactions. This is a list of questions that ask the wrongdoer and harmed person to reflect on a specific incident. In addition, they look at appropriate ways to make amends. The questions—which include “Who has been affected by what you have done?” and “What impact has this incident had on you and others?”—can be used in a variety of situations, from informal intervention in playground disputes to formal conferences in which the affected parties address the transgression.

The questions reflect a non-blaming, non-stigmatizing approach. The first one, “What happened?”, is far less accusatory than “What did you do?” With these questions children and young people know someone will listen to their side of

things. Knowing that their side has been heard, they are far more likely to accept the agreed-upon consequences.

Restorative approaches give children an opportunity to repair the harm they have caused. We have found that the last restorative question, “What do you think you need to make things right?”, is key to that process. Often that question will build a bridge between the wrongdoer and the person harmed.

Children and young people prove to be surprisingly good self-disciplinarians, ready to negotiate with each other and take responsibility for their behavior. Many of them are prepared to say, “I’ve done something wrong, and I’ll accept the consequences.”

People feel good about themselves, and the children seem to be happier. They feel more enfranchised, that people care about them. We believe restorative practices are a part of that.

With restorative practices, problematic behaviors are censured while the worth of the individual is upheld. We always focus on the thing that has gone wrong, rather than the person. We think this approach has raised the self-esteem of many of the children we’ve worked with, who suddenly believe, “I can talk my problems out.”

Restorative practices could have far-reaching effects. By reducing animosity and breaking down barriers between students and others, we believe restorative practices are preparing the children of Sefton to deal with issues far beyond the classroom. They might go out and help make the world a little bit better, rather than worse. If we try to help them to build bridges instead of walls, we’ve got a far better chance.

SOME THOUGHTS

“I am the decisive element in this school. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a member of staff I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humble or

humor, hurt or heal. In all sets it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be exacerbated or de-escalated—a child humanised or de-humanised” (Ginott, 1972).

The SCRП has partnered with the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) of England and Wales. The BIP is involved in 20 schools, in the most deprived areas of Sefton. The BIP is managed by Helen Flanagan, who oversees a multi-disciplinary team dedicated to working in schools. The BIP and the staff at the SCRП have worked together to develop the use of restorative practices within these schools, particularly looking at school exclusions, truancy and attendance. Flanagan believes that restorative practices fit well with approaches that the BIP has introduced, including solution-focused therapy and improving emotional literacy, saying, “Sometimes where a child has done something that’s harmed someone else, while we can look at in a solution-focused way, the harmed person needs a voice and the wrongdoer needs to know the effects if we’re going to be truly emotionally literate.”

There has been an overall 0.5 percent increase in attendance; a 55.6 percent decrease in the number of permanent exclusions; a 47 percent decrease in the number of fixed-term incidents and an 84 percent decrease in the number of days lost through fixed-term exclusion. (Data compares figures from 2002–2003 and 2005–2006.)

Other developments have been provided through our work in the community. The initial round of training included representatives from the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (ASBU). Antisocial behavior has been the focus of a great deal of political and media attention. Behavior that can be described as antisocial but not criminal has led to a raft of legislation to combat it.

Acceptable behavior contracts (ABCs) and antisocial behavior orders (ASBOs) have been employed to set limits and agreements for young people to conform to. We have worked with staff at the ASBU to make the application of these interventions more restoratively focused. We wanted our commu-

nity to accept the individual while challenging the nature of behaviors causing distress to others. “The restorative approach confronts and disapproves of wrongdoing while supporting and valuing the intrinsic worth of the wrongdoer” (O’Connell, Wachtel and Wachtel, 1999).

We strive for a positive change in culture—a shift away from punitive to restorative. We have these ASBOs that are very popular with some local authorities and which are quite punitive in their outlook. We want a more inclusive approach. It’s literally getting people to talk to each other again, rather than standing behind barristers, solicitors or complaint procedures and police officers. “We walk a fine line but we really need to step back and let the community make decisions” (Bazemore and Schiff, 2005).

We have worked closely with the local authority residential care homes. These four homes provide care for young people who are unable to live with their families. We noted a rise in the number of their young people being drawn into the criminal justice system, often for behaviors which would not have resulted in a court appearance if dealt with in the family home.

We have trained entire staff groups from three of the four homes. Our aim is to work with these groups of staff to embed the principles of restorative practices into the homes. We have looked at several applications including training the groups of young people living there in restorative approaches. We are currently in the process of monitoring and evaluating the efficacy of their application of the training.

The SCRP links to and works closely with the Parenting Team at the YOT. The parenting staff were trained in the conferencing model, and they identified programs that would address the needs of families. A number of parallel programs have been run, whereby young people and their parents follow identical outlines of work in separate groups.

In addition, there has been an increased ability to identify and provide restorative interventions for families with a wide range of issues. Our interventions have been used frequently in support of parenting.

A new area that is starting to implement and understand the use of restorative practices is Sefton Youth Service. The Youth Service is a statutory organization that provides services for young people in Sefton.

The idea is to train all Youth Service staff in the use of language to help them to deal with conflict and breakdown in relationships in the youth clubs and on the streets where there are tensions within communities. We have also started to train some of the relevant staff in the full use of the conferencing model for when a more formal approach is needed.

Overall, the focus of our work has been two-fold. The first is the effective delivery of conferences and other restorative practices across a range of agencies within Sefton. The second is to provide high standards of training to allow others to work more restoratively, too.

The SCRП has funded and provided training to all within the area. Over 250 adults have been trained in the delivery of conferences. We have employed and adapted a number of other training packages to deliver awareness and information sessions to about 1,000 adults.

In true restorative fashion we have included all aspects of the community. The training has also been provided for young people on a wide scale, helping to promote their communication and relationship-building skills.

The SCRП has attracted attention from leaders in the UK's restorative justice movement. Sir Charles Pollard, board member of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, formerly Chief Constable of the Thames Valley Police, said, "We've been looking over here for an example of an RJ approach in schools that was not just one school but a whole group of schools where they've really implemented it well, and therefore you can see what the results should be when you do it properly." He views the decrease in school exclusions as vitally important to reducing youth crime. "After permanent exclusions, you've lost them. They're on the street and much more likely to be getting into trouble with the law."

He added, “Apart from keeping thousands of young people in school, it would save the government millions. That’s merely the cost of exclusion, nothing about the cost of having young people on the streets, committing crime, taking drugs, having very unhappy lives, all the impact on public services in the future. The cost of that would be billions.” The Youth Justice Board of England and Wales spends £157m of its £383m budget on Young Offenders Institutions. This compares with £9m spent on prevention and just £4m on noncustodial schemes.

Pollard values Sefton’s implementation model because it employs a multi-agency team, highly trained as both practitioners and trainers, working full time, with funding to enable them to run low-cost training courses quickly and effectively. “If you’ve got a core of people trained to a high level of professionalism in RJ working together, some really good learning can go on. The standards increase and people get better and share experiences and practice. There’s a critical mass where if you do that, you really do move forward very fast and very well in RJ,” he said, adding, “I know enough about RJ to recognize something good in Sefton.”

Graham Robb, Youth Justice Board member, former head teacher, now seconded to the Department for Education and Skills of England and Wales as an advisor on behavior improvement and violence reduction in schools, concurs with Pollard on Sefton’s success: “First of all it’s in a multi-agency setting, and secondly, there’s the impact on exclusion. And I think it’s really important that it’s not just one school trying to do this on its own.”

Her Majesty’s Government inspected the Sefton YOT in 2005. The report noted that “Although yet to be fully developed, the recently established Centre for Restorative Practice was a serious and radical attempt to bring about a major change in the way conflicts are resolved, with the potential to reduce the number of cases requiring criminal justice intervention.”

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