

# How to use restorative justice in your classroom and school



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At the heart of restorative justice is the idea that everyone is inherently worthy and that our connection to one another is what matters most. So how can teachers and schools create a restorative culture where both individuals and the school community can thrive?

*Monash's Kristin Reimer researches the impact of restorative justice approaches in schools. Here she shares her insights into the key ideas behind the concept, and offers practical ideas on how to build it.*

In many schools, restorative justice starts out as a tool to use in a crisis, a way of repairing harm. However, in classrooms and across schools, restorative justice is most potent when used proactively. It builds and nurtures meaningful and just relationships, and a strong sense of community.

## What is restorative justice?

In a restorative approach, the inherent worth of each individual is recognised, and we seek to strengthen the essential ties that bind us to one another – in the classroom, school and the community.

Restorative justice is a framework that educators can use to create safe, supportive spaces in our schools. All members of the school learn to bravely engage in that community, and learn from honest – and sometimes difficult – conversations.

When relationships break down – as they will – it is about having fair responsive processes in place in which everyone can share their stories, hear the impact of their actions, repair the relational harm and figure out the best way forward, together.

It builds capacity – in students and in adults – to live in, understand and embrace the real world, with all its contradictions and complexities.

Fairholme College in Toowoomba has been using restorative justice proactively for more than 15 years.

## Restorative justice is not a way to police bad behaviour

Restorative Justice is not a kinder, gentler way to punish or to achieve compliance from students. It is not a quick fix for behavioural – or any – issues. It is not a technique, a tool, a set of steps, or a one-size-fits-all package.

It is a way of being, thinking, interacting, teaching and learning – with relationships at the centre of all we do, every day.

When you walk into a school community where it is practiced, you can feel the difference.

## Restorative justice should be used proactively

For a restorative culture to be built, restorative justice cannot be something that schools employ only when things go wrong.

Restorative principles – that everyone is worthy and that we are all interconnected – need to be intentionally and rigorously infused into all aspects of school life.

On a daily basis, students need to feel valued – no matter what – and to be actively involved in the building of meaningful school relationships. Otherwise, they will have little reason to trust the processes in place to repair those relationships, when conflict or harm occurs.

Proactive approaches to restorative justice look different from school to school, it is not a cookie cutter technique.



Daily circle practices in Monash's Teaching Partnerships Unit involve the whole class and help deepen relationships.

## Ways schools build a restorative culture

- Deepen relationships with daily or weekly circle practices that involve the whole class. Circles can be used to build listening and speaking skills, share knowledge, practice for tests, or problem solve for issues affecting the whole class.
- Teach and model communication skills so that students can both share and listen to diverse opinions. Embrace dissenting ideas as part of the learning process.
- Ensure that school practices and policies are flexible, not rigid. This allows schools to respond to students and staff as unique and valued individuals.
- Teach in a way that connects students with themselves and each other and, with that, to their curricula and the world. Make content relevant and engaging. Provide students with voice and choice in activities.
- Explicitly teach skills and attitudes for students to be able to problem-solve on their own and as a collective. Implicitly model a problem-solving stance in classroom interactions and in the way you teach.
- Be constantly curious. Ask questions. Don't make assumptions. Listen for understanding. Help students to do the same – in their social relationships and in their schoolwork.
- Treat conflict as natural, necessary and educational. Assure students that conflict will happen, and when it does, you will support them. Emphasise it's something you will all learn from.
- Put significant time into developing staff relationships that are honest, supportive and collaborative.



Restorative teaching styles help connect students with themselves and each other.

## How to respond to conflict or harm using a restorative justice approach

In a restorative response, schools are reminded that when a student does something 'against the rules' the important thing is not that a rule has been broken.

Schools create rules for the purpose of helping us stay safe and live well together. This idea helps move the focus beyond rules to the people involved and the relationships that have been harmed.

Each situation is unique, each person involved has different needs, and each solution looks different. What remains the same is that schools seek to repair harm and make things as right as possible.

This is very different from a punitive approach that seeks to blame, shame and give a 'wrongdoer' what they 'deserve'.

The difference can be seen in the questions that are asked when something occurs.

**Retributive / Punitive justice****Restorative justice**

What rules have been broken?

What happened?

Who did it?

Who has been harmed?

What do they deserve?

What needs to happen to make things as right as possible?

Schools intentionally build a restorative culture through how they respond to conflict and harm. Here are examples about what it looks like in practice.

- View discipline as an educational process in which students are supported to recognise mistakes, be accountable for their actions and learn for next time.
- Move away from finding the wrongdoer and meting out punishment and towards understanding who has been harmed, how they have been harmed and what they need to feel safe and whole.
- Provide transparent processes for students to bring forward matters of concern. It is important for students to know who to go to for help in dealing with issues and what sorts of conversations they might engage in when they access that help.
- Use non-blaming restorative questions when discussing any behaviour or issue with students.
  - What happened and what were you thinking at the time?
  - What have you thought about since?
  - Who has been affected by what happened? How do you think they've been affected?
  - What about this has been the hardest for you?
  - What do you think needs to be done to make things as right as possible?
- Deal with adult conflict (for example between staff and with parents/carers) in the same restorative way as with students.



## What restorative looks like in practice: Fairholme College in Toowoomba, Queensland

“It’s just the way we do things around here,” says Dr. Linda Evans, Principal, Fairholme College, an independent all-girls school in regional Queensland.

As a school, Fairholme holds relationships at its core. All practices and policies stem from that core.

In classrooms, Fairholme builds relationships between students through daily circle time where students learn about one another, express their feelings and solve everyday issues.

Prep teacher Karen Reading says in circle time students learn to “own their feelings” and it helps them build a “tool box in their memories” to deal with conflict in the playground, kindly and respectfully.

In the boarding house, all conflicts are dealt with restoratively – by focusing on the harm caused and by recognising the girls need to learn ways to live well with one another.

As Dr. Evans says: “If you value relationships, I don't know how you can work in a punitive model when something goes wrong.”

Boarding supervisors speak of the “evolution” of the girls in the boarding house from year to year, with the older girls taking on the role of the facilitators in restorative conversations.

Between students, restorative knowledge is passed on. A Restorative Practices Committee made up of Year 12 students teaches younger students the 5 Fs of dealing with issues: Fess up, Face up, Fix it, Follow up, be Flexible.

## Developing a network across Australia

Fairholme College is the first in a series of case studies that we are producing to highlight the experience of using restorative justice in diverse Australian schools.

The idea is to inspire and support other educators, build a network of restorative justice schools and showcase different approaches.

25 years ago, Australia was the first country in the world to use restorative justice in schools. Now it is a global movement and increasing in popularity. This is something to be celebrated.

*Are you a school using restorative justice? Email the author, [Kristin.Reimer@monash.edu](mailto:Kristin.Reimer@monash.edu) (<mailto:Kristin.Reimer@monash.edu>), if you are interested in being a part of an Australian restorative justice network.*

*Are you a teacher interested in strengthening your understanding and use of restorative approaches? Kristin is running a 12-week professional development short course on restorative justice (<https://www.monash.edu/education/professional-continuing-education/wellbeing/restorative-justice>). Applications are open now.*

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