



## Restorative Practices: Introduction, Tips, and Research

**What to do:** Review this information. Consider the potential benefits of using restorative practices in your program. Decide if you'd like to learn more about how to implement these practices effectively. See what training opportunities are available for you and others on your staff.

**Why it matters:** Restorative practices can help people process emotions, identify and evaluate the impacts of behavior, foster empathy, assume accountability, and practice compassion. These strategies acknowledge and honor the dignity of students and seek to prevent and address misbehavior by improving the program climate, building community, and strengthening relationships. Effective use of restorative practices has been correlated with increased academic achievement, improved problem-solving, social and emotional growth, and reduced recidivism.

### The 5 R's of Restorative Practices

#### 1. Relationships

Restorative practices can be helpful if a relationship has been harmed in some way. The person who did the harm uses a restorative practice to make amends and rebuild the relationship with the person(s) harmed by the action or behavior.

#### 2. Respect

The person(s) harmed and the person who inflicted the harm show respect for each other, in part by listening to the other's perspective, even if it differs from theirs.

#### 3. Responsibility

All involved parties, including the person(s) harmed, reflect on their actions and honestly consider what part they may have played in the situation.

#### 4. Repair

The person who inflicted the harm alleviates as much of the harm as possible. All parties understand and accept that 100 percent restoration isn't possible in every situation.

#### 5. Reintegration (or Reconnection)

The community involved accepts that repair has been done to the extent possible and allows the person who did the harm to reintegrate back into the group with trust and respect.

### Want to Know What the Research Says?

See "Restorative Practices: Insights From Research and Practice" later in this brief for more about the rationale behind restorative practices in education and what the research says about implementation and outcomes.



## The 80/20 Rule of Restorative Practices

This rule posits that 80 percent of the time, we should be working to build authentic relationships with our students. That way, when there's a need to repair harm done to them or by them (20 percent of the time), the foundational relationships and trust are already in place. The continuum below shows what this might look like in practice.

**Continuum of Restorative Practices**

Identity	Classroom Practices	Community Building	Curriculum	Relational Conversations	Group or Circle	Formal Conference
Celebrating character, personality, and background Examining behavior	Procedures and routines Creating an emotionally safe space Trauma-informed practices	Circle time Relationship building Learning circles Curriculum circles	Social and emotional literacy Problem-solving How to communicate effectively Restorative language	"I" statements Restorative chats Scripted questions Peer moderators Use for minor incidents	Whole class Problem-solving Mini-conference Scripted questions Peer council	Community conference Healing circle Scripted questions Use for serious incidents and issues
Preventative/Foundational				Restorative		
Build and maintain relationships/prevent conflict and harm				Repair relationships/resolve conflict		
Characteristics and Level of Effort						
Informal and formal Every day What we believe	Informal Every day Less planning	Formal and informal 3 times per week More planning	Formal 1-2 times per week Structured More planning	Informal More of these Basic skill Less planning	Reasonable skill More time Some planning Formal follow-up	Formal High-level skill More planning Formal follow-up

*Adapted from CommonJustice.org and LearningtoGive.org*

*If we lose love and self-respect for each other,  
this is how we finally die.*

—Maya Angelou



## Restorative Practice Example

### Restorative Circles

Restorative circles are frequently used in place of punitive discipline. All parties involved, including those who may have witnessed an incident, are invited to participate in the circle. Restorative circles work best when they're an integral part of the school and/or program culture.

These are key elements of restorative circles:

- Create an emotionally safe, supportive space for all participants.
- Prepare (as a facilitator or participant) for “when, where, and what” to discuss.
- Select a focus area, theme, or topic in advance.
- Schedule appropriately to allow time for all to participate.
- Develop an opening routine and a closing ceremony to transition into and out of the circle.
- Encourage students to connect within the circle by sharing personal stories or insights.
- Use a talking piece to denote who is the speaker at a given time.
- Model empathy by acknowledging, summarizing, and paraphrasing, and encourage students to do the same.
- Develop the concept of “being an ally” (using your voice, influence, or presence to support another person).
- Look at issues on a systems level, if age appropriate.

### Implementing Restorative Circles

Start simply. Developing the desired discussion interactions within your circle will take time and trust. Let participants get the feel by discussing something that isn't emotionally charged but will elicit differing opinions (like a favorite movie, food, or time of year). The next step might be to discuss a favorite memory — a little more personal, but still a fairly safe space. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- If you could live anywhere, where would it be?
- If you could go to any point in history, where would you go?
- What motivates you?
- Talk about something happening in the world that concerns you.
- Talk about something happening in the world today that excites or inspires you.
- Name something you've never done but would like to try.
- What makes you feel like you're an important part of our program?
- What felt fun, easy, or natural for you today? What felt weird, scary, or challenging?
- When have you felt confident (connected, powerful, positive, hopeful, safe, supported, etc.) about something, and why?
- What do the words “justice” and “injustice” mean to you? How do you think we can proactively create a more just program, community, and world?



## Eight Myths and Facts About Restorative Practices

- 1. Myth:** Restorative practices are soft.

**Fact:** High expectations and accountability are central to restorative practices. See myth#2.
- 2. Myth:** Restorative practices are just an easy way to avoid suspensions.

**Fact:** The goal of restorative practices is to keep students in school and learning. But these practices don't eliminate harsher consequences, including suspensions, which may at times be necessary (to ensure the safety of staff and students, for example).
- 3. Myth:** Restorative practices just put even more burden on already overburdened educators.

**Fact:** The goal of restorative practices is to reduce disruptive student behavior and establish a respectful environment where instruction and learning can occur, thus decreasing the burden for educators.
- 4. Myth:** Restorative practices take time away from instruction.

**Fact:** Implementing restorative practices does take time up front as routines, relationships, and trust are built. But as students develop self-awareness and self-regulation, it ultimately takes less time than dealing with the same behavior issues over and over.
- 5. Myth:** Every school or program has to develop a set of specific questions to implement restorative practices.

**Fact:** Implementing restorative practices begins with a mindset. Yes, there are guiding questions that can be used effectively, but there's no single script to use in every school, program, or situation.
- 6. Myth:** Restorative circles are no different than going to group therapy.

**Fact:** Restorative circles and restorative practices are therapeutic, but they're not therapy, and you don't have to be a licensed therapist to be a facilitator or a circle keeper. You do need to be honest, present, open, and authentic with the students who are participating.
- 7. Myth:** Restorative circles and restorative practices are no more than people sitting in a circle talking about their feelings.

**Fact:** The intent of restorative practices is to build and reaffirm relationships while also developing social and emotional skills that promote the building of a supportive, respectful, and inclusive school and program community.
- 8. Myth:** Restorative practices are just for the counselors and the administration to use since they're the ones who deal with disciplinary issues.

**Fact:** For restorative practices to be successful, they should be used consistently and be part of the climate and culture of the school day and the out-of-school time program. It's not just a response to student behavior, but a widespread approach to interactions within the school community.



## Restorative Practices: Insights From Research and Practice

An increasing number of schools and school districts are considering alternatives to zero tolerance policies when addressing student behavior. These policies often punish major and minor infractions uniformly and harshly, and they disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities, prompting researchers to examine the harmful effects of such policies (Skiba, 2002; Skiba et al., 2002). School suspension has been one of the most widely used disciplinary responses, yet it is ineffective in promoting prosocial behaviors (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Petrosino and colleagues (2012) found that, increasingly, school misbehavior was being handed over to the police (especially where there was already a police presence in the school), leading to more youth entering the legal system. Yet despite increased expulsions and reduced graduation rates, these practices had no positive impact on school safety (Losen, 2014).

### The Shift Toward Restorative Practices

After surveying the evidence from research and practice, the U.S. Department of Education concluded that restorative practices and other strategies such as the Good Behavior Game, trauma-informed practices, supports for students' social and emotional well-being, and positive behavioral interventions and supports "are more effective than corporal punishment or exclusionary discipline in addressing students' individual needs and improving school climate and safety" (U.S. Department of Education, 2023, p. 8).

"Restorative practices represent a philosophy that recognizes the importance of prioritizing the relationships and connections between and among all people within a school community and provides a framework for creating positive school climate and culture" (Frieberg, 2014).

Out-of-school time programs, whether initiating restorative practices on their own or as part of a school- or districtwide movement, can benefit from understanding the rationale and potential outcomes as they shift from punitive to restorative practices. Here are two examples:

- In 2015-17, Pittsburgh public schools (PPS) conducted a randomized study in its 54 schools involving the International Institute for Restorative Practices' (IIRP's) SaferSanerSchools™ method (IIRP, updated 2019; Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2014), now called [Whole-School Change](#). The study focused on **11 key elements**: affective statements, restorative questions, small impromptu conferences, proactive circles, responsive circles, restorative conferences, fair process, reintegrative management of shame, restorative staff community, restorative approach with families, and fundamental hypothesis of understanding. Schools adopting new practices reported qualitative data on improved school climate, reduced suspension rates, and reduced disparity in suspension rates between African American students and their white counterparts (and between students from lower and upper socioeconomic levels) (Augustine et al., 2018).
- In 2005, with a student base of over 45,000 students in grades K-12, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California launched its Whole School Restorative Justice (WSRJ) program, which was then supplemented with a Peer Restorative Justice program. WSRJ uses **multilevel strategies** to change school climate across the schools, using classroom circles (tier 1); circles to resolve conflicts, repair harm, and build relationships (tier 2); and mediation and family group conferencing as well as welcome/reentry circles (tier 3)





(OUSD, 2014). Two years after implementation, OUSD reported a significant decline in suspensions, a significant closure of the discipline gap between African American and white students, and other positive outcomes.

REL Northwest (2018) summarized [other findings](#) about the effectiveness and implementation of restorative practices in schools.

### Keys for Successful Implementation

The National Education Policy Center (Gregory & Evans, 2020) examined the research on restorative initiatives in U.S. schools, with a focus on implementation and outcomes. Based on their findings, they say successful initiatives should be:

- **Principle based** — Ground restorative practices in the values of restorative justice in education: “respect, dignity, and mutual concern for all members of the learning community; a commitment to justice and equity; and a belief in the value and worth of each person” (p. 4).
- **Comprehensive** — Consider not only student behaviors, but also staff behaviors, policies and procedures, pedagogical choices, curricular decisions, and schoolwide decision-making processes.
- **Contextually sensitive** — Consider strengths and needs within the school or district, get input from stakeholders, and adjust implementation as needed.
- **Strategic** — Seek to engage supportive allies while honoring “slow adopters,” whose critiques and questions can inform successful implementation.
- **Supported and sustained** — Ongoing support and professional development are essential to build capacity over time to create shared understandings of the equity focus of restorative practices — and to provide the time and resources to change mindsets, practices, and outcomes.

To lay the groundwork for successful implementation, some research (Fronius et al., 2019; OUSD, 2014) suggests that educational communities may want to do the following:

- Pursue grant funding, leverage community resources, and/or pool resources with neighboring communities to ensure adequate **funding and resources** to implement restorative practices properly.
- Ensure a **culture** of restorative practice readiness (beliefs aligned with foundational restorative justice principles and values) and patience (because true change takes time and effort).
- Plan for and institute strong, universal, and ongoing **professional development** sufficient for all staff to understand specific techniques and the reasoning behind a shift from punitive to restorative approach.
- Emphasize that restorative practices can be woven into **existing activities**.
- Set and update **clear expectations**, and meet regularly to ensure team momentum.
- Ensure accurate **data collection** mechanisms for behavior incidents to help gauge program success.
- Learn from the successes of other restorative initiatives to help develop a **structure, protocols, and documentation**.
- Keep **sustainability and continuous improvement** in mind.



- Develop and monitor clear **discipline policies and practices** for serious student behaviors.
- Be sure **students** have a clear understanding of the use and benefits of restorative practices as proactive paths to shared success, not as an alternative form of punishment or an opportunity to avoid class/responsibilities.

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This resource was developed in 2024 by the Nita M. Lowey 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at [21stcclcntac.org](https://21stcclcntac.org). Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

