

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: PROMOTING HEALING, LEARNING, AND GROWTH

This practice brief is intended to guide educators in tailoring responses to harmful behavior in schools to support students from early childhood to adolescence.

Authors: Gabriel Velez, PhD; Jean Sack, MA; Laura Pareja Conto, MA; Kara Beckman, MA; Holly Recchia, PhD

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Restorative justice is an approach to being in a school community grounded in relationships (see figure, right). Its practices build relationships, foster respect for others, and promote environments where everyone feels a sense of belonging. It also includes reflective and collaborative accountability practices that focus on repairing harm to people and relationships. These relational accountability practices lead to social and emotional learning, growth, and healing and—when appropriately scaffolded—more effectively support young people to take accountability for their behavior than punitive responses. Restorative justice practices can be used in informal conversations and in more formal, structured dialogues.



PUNITIVE RESPONSES

Punitive accountability is imposed: authority figures determine blame and impose consequences.

Punitive approaches teach passive responses to harmful behavior.⁸

RESTORATIVE RESPONSES

Relational accountability is inclusive: people involved determine how to address needs and foster respectful relationships following harm.⁹

Restorative approaches teach everyone to take active responsibility for responding to harmful behavior.

A Core Difference Between Punitive and Restorative Responses: *students' social, moral, and emotional development is fostered through relational accountability, promoting agency and engagement in addressing harm and learning from behavior.*

Punishment is harmful, ineffective, and inequitable.

- Among one 10th grade U.S. cohort in the 2000s, suspensions led to 67,000 dropouts, resulting in social costs of over \$35 billion over time.¹
- Punishment negatively affects engagement and academic achievement.²
- Students punished for minor infractions were 64% more likely to be punished later.³
- In 2017-2018, Black students in the U.S. accounted for 15% of enrollment, but over 30% of expulsions, suspensions, and school-related arrests.⁴

Restorative justice is associated with positive developmental and educational outcomes.

- Educators reported restorative justice helped foster students' social emotional skills and leadership.⁵
- Students reported better relationships, school connectedness, and self-efficacy to address interpersonal conflicts.⁶
- Suspensions dropped by 44% after one year of restorative justice implementation in one district.⁷

CONTACT THE AUTHORS

Gabriel Velez
gabriel.velez@marquette.edu

Jean Sack
jklaso2@uic.edu

Laura Pareja Conto
lauraparejaconto@gmail.com

Kara Beckman
beckm118@umn.edu

Holly Recchia
holly.recchia@concordia.ca



Practice Brief, Vol. 4, No. 2 (August 2023)

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Essential to teaching relational accountability for behavior is engaging children in critical, developmentally tailored, reflective dialogue about needs, harms, responsibility, and obligations.¹⁰

Support students' developing capacities to engage in restorative conversations by coaching them towards:

- Using “I” statements to communicate their perspective, needs, and awareness/understanding of others’ perspectives to both students and adults (e.g., “I felt left out during recess. I need to feel like my friends will include me, and I understand that I hurt them when I threw the pencil at them in class.”)
- Acknowledging and taking ownership of actions and reactions (e.g., “What was my role in this situation?”)
- Focusing on problem-solving, rather than blaming or punishing, while asserting harm is not acceptable
- Going beyond the conflict to recognize that people are not defined by their harms and we are all people with feelings, needs, and who make mistakes (e.g., “What do we appreciate about each other?”)
- Empathizing with and honoring multiple viewpoints (e.g., “How are our perspectives similar and different, and what can we learn from each perspective?”)
- Developing skills to articulate their needs in relationships with students and adults in the school community

Model and promote restorative climates:

- Treat behavioral mistakes like academic mistakes: recognize children are figuring out how to manage emotions and conflicts, and thus they need opportunities to learn, change, and grow
- Engage students as leaders by seeking their input and training them as facilitators (see practice tips below)
- Be able to acknowledge your own role in conflict and harm, demonstrating relational accountability to students and other adults in the school community
- Develop trusting and authentic relationships with students by admitting mistakes, valuing their voices, and listening to their suggestions and requests
- Advocate for restorative policies and whole-school implementation
- Employ restorative approaches with colleagues and families
- Remember that results in students’ learning, growth, and development require sustained commitment

SUMMARY & LIMITATIONS

Restorative justice models work with students, rather than imposing consequences on them. Research on best implementation practices is still emerging, and more research is needed on how to tailor practices to students’ varied needs and capacities. Restorative justice is fundamentally relational and contextual, and thus, inevitably diverse in its implementation. Still, a restorative approach better supports young people’s social, moral, and emotional development in response to harmful and problematic behavior. The school community can also benefit from incorporating students’ input and recognizing their potential role as positive social leaders.



A restorative conversation can be structured around six questions” scaffolded to children’s developmental level

1. What happened?

2. What were you thinking and feeling at the time?

3. What have you thought about and felt since then?

4. Who was affected by what happened and in what way?

5. What needs to happen to make things right and whose responsibility is it?

6. How can we avoid something similar in the future?

SELECTED REFERENCES AND

PRACTICE TIPS: For the references cited in this brief and practice tips from schools, please [click this link](#) or scan the QR code.

