



# A restorative approach to student discipline...

Restorative Discipline Practice results in a fundamental shift in how people – students and adults – interact with each other with honest, heartfelt accountability.

**It is a Friday afternoon** in September at a typical high school in a suburban town in Southern California. Toward the end of sixth period, a 10th grade student named Josh stands up. Clearly done with Spanish class, he gathers his belongings, flings open the door and storms out. While leaving, he utters something under his breath that is not quite audible but is, most certainly, not nice either.

The teacher, stunned at first, quickly becomes embarrassed – after all, the student just blatantly and defiantly left class without permission. He then becomes angry, an understandable reaction given the circumstances. Faced with 40 pairs of eyes waiting to see what he might do next, the teacher is quick to blurt out, “That will be two days of class suspension!” And, with that, classroom order and hierarchy is reestablished. Case closed. Or is it?

Scenarios like this play themselves out all over the country every single day. There are rules about right and wrong, and who is in charge. There is an order to the way we “do” discipline in school. And technically, there’s nothing really wrong with the way we have always done things, except that our past practices do not necessarily guarantee the results we are really after.

## Traditional discipline model

In the traditional discipline model, here’s what happens next. The student, Josh, sits in the office on Monday and Tuesday during sixth period. He may have Spanish homework to do, but given what he did to the teacher, the likelihood is that he will not be given the work. In this case, because it is well

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within the teacher's discretion to provide or not provide work for a suspended student, Josh probably won't get the assignments.

On Wednesday, Josh will reluctantly return to class, if at all. He may have spoken to an assistant principal about what happened. If he did, he was more than likely chastised for leaving in the first place. Back in class, Josh is minimally two days behind his peers, because he hasn't been in class and hasn't done the homework. He is angry that his teacher "got him in trouble." He also has to face the other students. He will either joke about what he did, sit sullenly and silently in the class, or not go at all.

The teacher, on the other hand, will be as unhappy about having Josh back in class as Josh is to be there. He is still most likely angry that Josh had the nerve to leave the classroom defiantly and mutter something rude as well. Even though Josh was not in class Monday or Tuesday, that hardly represents a harsh enough consequence for what he did.

Given how both parties are feeling, the best that can be hoped for in this scenario is that the two will ignore each other. The reality, however, is that Josh won't attend regularly and the teacher will be relieved he isn't there.

## Restorative Discipline Practice

The first part of this story happened exactly as described. It just so happened that we had just finished a Restorative Discipline Practice Training at that high school when the assistant principal asked us if we wanted to "try it" on this particular student.

Josh had no idea what he was walking into when he was ushered to the assistant principal's office that afternoon. After we introduced ourselves, we started the work. Question No. 1 is, "What happened?" That is pivotal for many reasons. How you ask (in a non-judgmental almost casual way) sets the tone for the rest of the experience.

Timing here is also critical in that you have to let the student get the whole story out. And, no matter what he says, the person asking the questions is just listening – really listening – to the whole answer. You have to be ready to hear the entire story and to realize that much of it is exaggerated, inaccurate and emotionally charged. The content

of what's being said is important, but not as important as the trust you're building in how you listen to the story.

In this case, Josh had a lot to say. He told us, "Everyone in the class was goofing around and talking. No one else got in trouble. The teacher is horrible and doesn't do anything, ever." And then came the questions: "Are you going to talk to the rest of the class? Are you going to do anything about the teacher? Are you going to talk to him?"

As the story progressed, he told us that he got fed up with what was going on in class and decided to leave. He also told us he said something "not nice" on his way out the door. It's interesting to note that the students do actually admit what they did as they tell the story. In large part we believe that this is because we let them tell the whole story. We don't interject, or admonish or judge – we just listen.

When we think the student has told the entire story, we then tell one tiny white lie. We tell the student that we are going to deal with everything he just talked about and address it, which we don't do, mainly because the real work is about to begin with the student now that the story is out. We tell the student that today is about talking just with him, and about helping him look at just his part of the interaction.

## Digging a little deeper

The second question digs a little deeper. And again, how you ask it is critical: "What were you thinking at the time?" Josh replied quickly, "I was tired of not doing anything in class, and the teacher wasn't doing anything. My mom always yells at me because she has to wait in traffic when she comes to pick me up. I figured I would get out early and make her happy. I didn't think it would make any difference." Now Josh has given us something to work with.

The next question is, "What have you thought about since the incident happened?" This too is an important question, and one you have to be ready to poke around in a bit. Usually when we ask it, the student quickly replies, "Nothing." Here's where we get to work. "Have you thought about what it will be like going back into class after your suspension is over?" The truth of the matter is

they have thought about the incident since it happened; they just don't realize they have. To this, Josh replied, "I can't go back there. That teacher will hate me forever for leaving the classroom and saying what I said." So truly, it's not that kids don't know or own what they've done; they just don't have the skill-set to know how to successfully navigate their way back into class.

"Who do you think has been affected by what happened?" Josh had ready answers for this also. His thinking went something like this: "Well, the teacher had to stop what he was doing and go call security. Security had to leave their post to go and look for me." "And how about your mom? What did she say to you when she got the call that you were being class suspended?"

"She was really mad at me...again."

At that point, our work is nearly finished, and we ask, "So what do you think you need to do to make things right, or as right as they can be?" And in that moment, students almost always immediately say, "I need to apologize." And now we can start working on helping them craft an appropriate and heartfelt apology.

We didn't tell Josh what he did wrong, or tell him what he should have done differently. We didn't lecture, or yell, or shake our finger, and it didn't matter one bit that we were the adults and he was the kid. We simply led Josh through the questions, guiding him to recognize and own his behavior and make amends for it. He also didn't spend the entire conversation blaming the adults. The questions guided him to look inward.

## Crafting an apology

The apology of the conversation has four parts to it. As soon as the student says he needs to apologize, we ask if we can help him craft the apology. If the student agrees, we model and label the apology. We start with, "I apologize for..." which guides the student in identifying his behavior. The next part is, "I recognize..." which calls on the student to acknowledge how his behavior impacted either the person or the environment. The third stem, "In the future I promise to..." assists the student in committing to future behavior, and the final stem is "If you notice me \_\_\_\_\_, could you help me

by \_\_\_\_\_.”

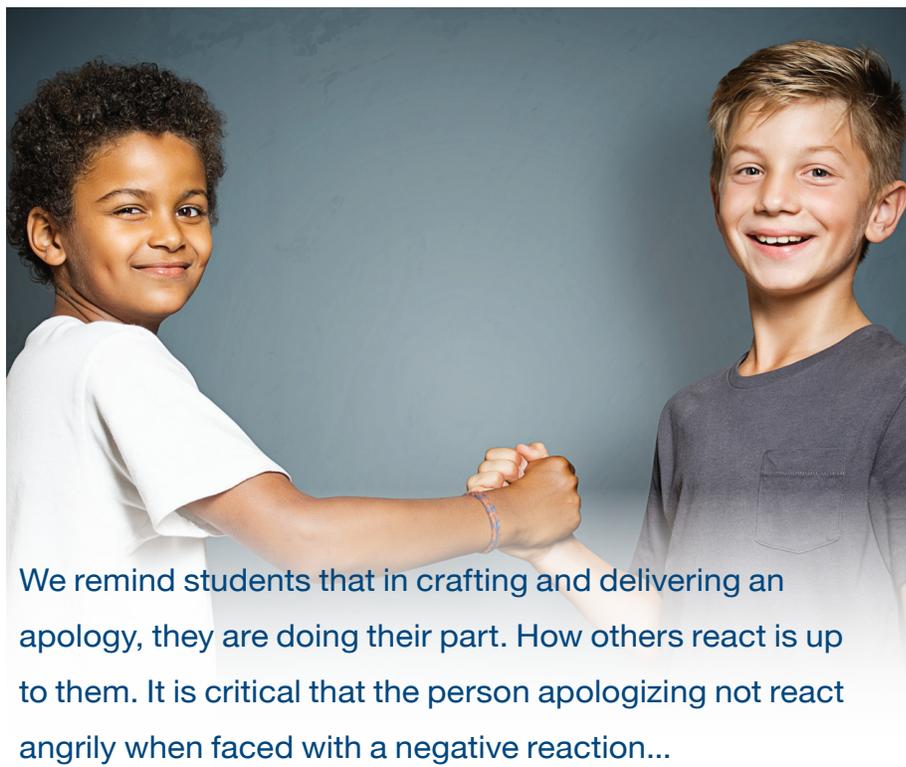
In Josh’s scenario, his apology went something like this: “Mr. Smith, I apologize for leaving class early on Friday. I recognize that by leaving class, I disrupted the learning environment. In the future, I promise I will stay in class and complete the work you assign us. If you notice me getting antsy or agitated in the future, could you give me that little head shake you do? That will remind me of this conversation.”

Once we assisted Josh in crafting his apology, we then coached him on the various responses he could expect from the person he was apologizing to by role-playing his apology being well received and then by role-playing his apology not being well received.

This point cannot be underestimated. Often, students feel that doing the work of creating and delivering an apology should in and of itself make everything all right. What we know in doing this work is that sometimes the person receiving the apology is still angry, hurt or upset. And in that case, it is entirely possible the person on the receiving end says something that reflects those feelings.

We coach the students through that possibility and role-play negative responses. We remind students that in crafting and delivering the apology, they are doing their part. How others react is up to them. It is critical that the person apologizing not react angrily when faced with a negative reaction, because if they do, they might as well not bother apologizing in the first place. In addition, if they get angry, the person on the receiving end will more than likely feel that they were right about the person apologizing in the first place.

We are reminded of a time we were working with a middle school student and this phenomenon became clear to us. The student got a referral from the “lunch lady” for repeatedly cutting in line. We went through the whole process of apologizing, and everything was going very well until we role-played the lunch lady not receiving the apology very well. The student we were working with became really angry right there in the assistant principal’s office, which ended up being perfect because we were able to share how important it is to simply say, “Thank you for accepting my apology.” And to then follow up the apology with actions that show



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the apology was sincere.

For Josh, after role-playing several times, we told him it was time to go deliver the apology. His eyes got huge and he asked, “Now?” We replied, “Yep. The timing is perfect. It’s sixth period.” He responded, “I can’t apologize in front of the whole class!” We especially love it when kids say this because then we get to say, “Well, you had no problem doing what you did in front of the whole class, so now we’re going to go and make it right in front of the whole class.” And for that, there is no response. Josh nodded and said, “Okay, let’s go.”

So here we go, the two of us, along with the assistant principal and a teacher we picked up along the way, all walking down to the classroom. At this point, we are hoping for an open response, but the teacher didn’t know we were coming, so a variety of responses were certainly possible.

When we entered the classroom, the assistant principal asked if he could have a couple of minutes to speak to the class. After the teacher agreed, Josh sincerely gave his apology. When he was done, the assistant principal quietly asked the teacher if he wanted us to take Josh back to the office, considering he was class suspended for two days. The teacher looked at Josh, patted the desk where

he had been sitting and said, “You sit right here.” He then turned back to what he had been working on. A couple seconds later, the teacher turned back to Josh, shook his hand and said, “We’re good.”

And in that exchange, we knew for certain that Restorative Practices will work if the adults do it right. Yes, it takes some time and energy. And, no, we don’t tell kids what they should have done differently or lecture them about what to do next time. But we do get to facilitate a fundamental shift in how people – kids and adults – can interact with each other with honest, heartfelt accountability. ■

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