

## What Is Restorative Justice?

Restorative Justice is an ancient concept used by indigenous people to build community and resolve conflict for thousands of years. In the past 25 years, the concept has gained ground as a powerful tool in justice systems and schools around the world. More than just a humane alternative to the retributive justice and scholastic discipline systems, Restorative Justice succeeds in lowering recidivism and suspensions, and builds community wherever it is practiced. Studies show recidivism rates dropping 90%, and victim satisfaction with the process going up 90%.

In the Western world, we have built our justice and school discipline systems around three questions: What laws have been broken? Who did it? How can we punish them? The system is offender- focused: We concentrate on what kind of punishment to mete out to the offender, and do not pay much attention to the harm and trauma caused to the victim and community.

Restorative Justice takes a more holistic approach. When harm has been done, Restorative Justice asks who has been affected. What needs have arisen due to this harm, and whose obligation is it to meet those needs? In its most basic sense, Restorative Justice is about harms, needs, and obligations. Ultimately, it is about repairing relationships. There are many ways to practice Restorative Justice, with the common theme being restoration of the community. Crime is seen as a tear in the fabric of a community and a “violation of people and interpersonal relationships” (Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*).

Restorative Justice involves the community in resolving conflict and repairing harm. A restorative circle not only includes the person who caused the harm (offender) and the person he or she harmed (victim), it also includes the families, circle keepers, community members, and anyone else who needs to be there. Restorative Justice addresses both the harm caused by and revealed by the offense. The victim may talk about how the offender’s actions have affected him or her, and the offender may reveal what he or she has gone through in the past that contributed to his or her doing the harm. This creates an understanding of the event, and provides context and a foundation for healing from both sides. All members of the restorative circle decide on an agreement or action plan by consensus.

Restorative Justice is more than just a tool for conflict resolution. It is a paradigm shift, a drastic change in the way we look at and respond to harm and discipline. Practices include restorative circles, family group conferencing, victim/offender mediation or dialogue, victim/offender education, and circles of support and accountability. Restorative discipline in schools supports and works well with other conflict resolution methods already in use.

For a process to be restorative, it should answer these questions affirmatively: Does it address the harms, needs and causes? Are all the necessary stakeholders involved? Does the plan encourage self-responsibility? Are there opportunities for dialogue and participatory decision-making? Is the process respectful to all parties?