

Creating Restorative Communities

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This Info Sheet is for practitioners looking to develop their thinking around restorative communities and expand their knowledge of restorative approaches.

“Everyone needs to recognise themselves as part of the community in which they live in, to participate in the decisions that concern them, and to feel listened to when they are in difficulty and, in everyday life, all human beings need to feel confident, to trust and to be respected. Despite these basic human needs, local communities increasingly experience divisions between groups, violence against the weakest ones, repressive measures against those ones who look different, marginalisation, and exclusion. A cultural change is necessary, able to overcome prejudices and stereotypes, to strengthen relationships, to take care of those ones in distress, and to heal social divisions. There is a widespread need for greater trust, responsibility and solidarity between people. This requires the commitment of everyone, including policy makers, to support a sense of community and strengthen social cohesion.”

European Forum for Restorative Justice 2022

On a daily basis people form, nurture, and maintain a wide range of often complex relationships at home, in school, at work, and socially. Where the majority of these relationships continue without issue, unfortunately upset, frustration, disagreement and even conflict are almost unavoidable aspects of everyday life. When this happens relationships, trust, and lines of communication can be damaged. Fortunately conflict is usually easily resolved and relationships, or harm caused, quickly repaired. This happens every day in families, schools, workplaces, and communities. Outside of families, however, when the ‘harm caused’ is more significant or serious, our (society’s) response is mostly punitive rather than relational (relationship focused) and restorative (repairing). In school situations this may result in exclusion; in workplaces this may mean disciplinary action; in communities this may mean criminal charges.

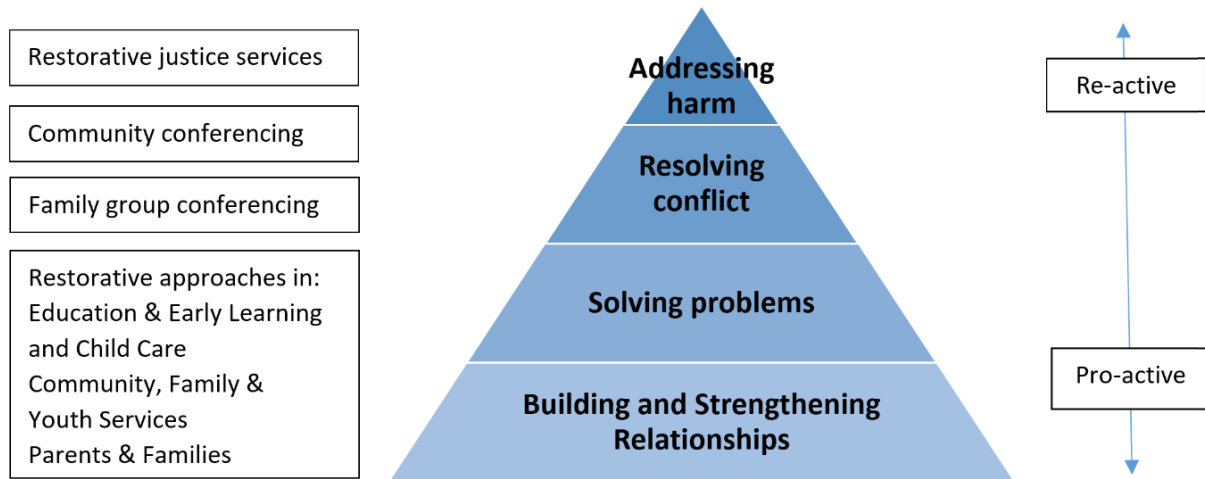
These punitive responses to conflict, or harmful behaviour rarely addresses the needs of everyone affected or gives those harmed a voice. Punitive responses also fail to address underlying issues which may have led to the behaviour and are therefore less likely to prevent a re-occurrence of the conflict, harmful behaviour, or reoffending (Scottish Government Research, 2012). A relational and restorative approach to addressing harm, however, encourages individuals or groups to take responsibility for their words, or actions, and to repair the harm caused whether that be fixing damage, rebuilding trust, or repairing relationships (Finis, 2021). A restorative approach provides those who have been harmed an opportunity to be involved in the process, have a voice, and influence the outcome. A restorative approach also encourages those who have caused the harm to learn alternative ways of behaving in the future.

Restorative approaches therefore empower all those involved, including those harmed. Restorative approaches are also rights-based; the solution is decided by those involved and the consequences are specific to the circumstances. This is different to punitive approaches where individuals in authority positions (teachers, police, judges etc.) decide the response which is usually a fixed punishment. Moving away from punitive to restorative approaches requires a significant shift in both culture and mindset.

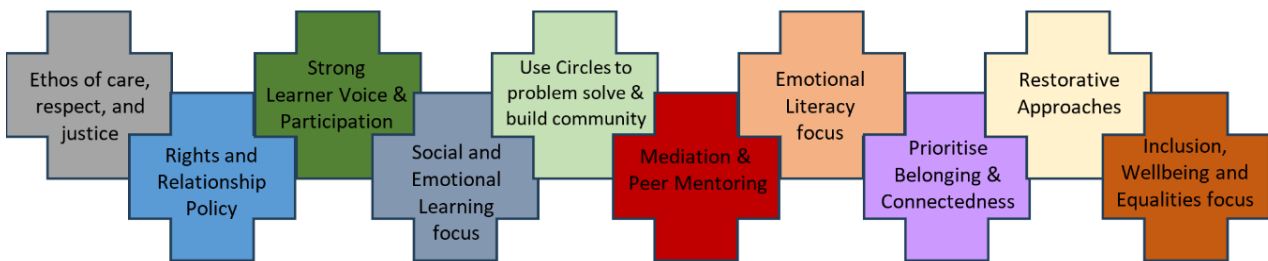
Used effectively across communities, restorative approaches, however, could promote responsible citizenship and improve social cohesion. They’re more likely to be effective if the whole community system has a shared understanding of what being restorative means, and if restorative values, thinking and language are used consistently across that system. I.e. family settings, schools, within the wider community.

Effective use of restorative approaches across different ages and stages, at different levels, and in different settings, could help nurture confidence in restorative justice being a credible option when laws have been broken. Use of restorative justice could reduce the criminalisation of children and young people and potentially reduce the cycle of re-offending.

Trusting and supportive relationships are the foundation for restorative approaches. Communities that proactively build, nurture, and strengthen relationships, at every level, are well equipped to harness the power of these relationships and use a restorative approach when conflict does arise. The following diagram highlights the full continuum from regular proactive relationship building to reactive restorative responses to harm and conflict, including restorative justice:



An illustration of what a holistic whole system approach to relational and restorative practice across education could look like can be seen in the diagram below. The key components are non-sequential and inter-related.



Across all Children and Families services in Scotland including education, community learning and development, social care, and the justice system there are many relational and restorative approaches used. Regardless of what they are called, however, they all have these features in common: they are inclusive; prioritise wellbeing, care & equity; and uphold children’s rights (and wider human rights). Restorative Communities value people and relationships above processes and punishment.

References

Scottish Government Research (2012) What Works to Reduce Reoffending: A Summary of the Evidence (updated 2015) ISBN 9781785443336
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 Finis, M (2021) Restorative Practice: Building relationships, improving behaviour and creating stronger communities
 Wachtel, T. (2005, November). The next step: Developing restorative communities. Paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices, Manchester, UK

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