

# Discipline that Restores\*

by Roxanne Claassen

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Working with the children in my classroom is a joy that I look forward to each day. Part of that joy, believe it or not, is working at

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issues of discipline together with them. Probably a key word here is "together." From the very first day of school we began creating a community together where all of us could feel safe and valued for our unique gifts and personalities. We talked about solving the problems between us in ways that would restore relationships rather than in ways that would separate persons from each other. We set up a plan that included rules with consequences that would be restorative rather than punitive, that would be reasonable rather than unreasonable, and that would be respectful of the people involved (reasonable, related, and respectful consequences come from Jane Nelson's book *Positive Discipline*). Our plan also includes peer mediator training and class meetings.

The morning starts with each person signing up for a job of their choice

for that day. We do it each and every day because that is what was decided to be the best at our first class meeting. Two of the jobs on the list are the peer mediators for the day. Just about every situation that is a conflict of some sort can be used as a teachable moment in our life together. The very act of signing up became a conflict when people began waiting at the door as soon as they got off the bus so they could get first choice. This led to several incidents of name calling, general pushing and shoving, and angry feelings that were expressed in a number of ways that were not very constructive.

Rather than trying to punish individuals for their misconduct, we decided that the problem was really the system we had for getting jobs. We put aside our other plans in order to work this problem out. In our class meeting we went through a conflict resolution process that included a time for recognizing the injustices that had been experienced, a time for making any necessary restitution (in this case, a number of apologies were made and accepted), and a time for looking at what we could do to solve the problem so it would not happen in the future.

"Future intentions" is probably our favorite part of the process because we can be very creative. All suggestions were recorded on the chalkboard. When we ran out of ideas, we went back and checked each suggestion to see if it was respectful, related, restorative, and reasonable. We eliminated any that did not meet our criteria. Using consensus, we decided on a solution that seemed like it would really work well for us.

Our solution was one that called for a random drawing of numbers each morning to decide your place in line and a rule that you could only do a job once a week unless no one else wanted to do it. Finally, we set a trial period and a follow-up meeting date to determine whether or not this agreement was working well. We continue to use this plan with a few modifications. The whole process took about 30 minutes and it solved the problem so well that we have not had to spend any more time on it. A

conflict resolution process is very efficient.

To solve interpersonal problems we use a very similar process that does not involve the entire class but only the persons having the problem and two peer mediators. This takes a great deal of pressure off me to be the powerful controller, or the judge and jury for every dispute that occurs. The fact that all of the children know the process saves enormous amounts of time because as they become more and more experienced and see it modeled as much as possible by me, they become better able to solve problems between them without me or the peer mediators. There are fewer incidents of one person coming to "tell" on another because they know that "telling" will result in a mediation that involves them and whoever else is involved. "Telling" is transformed as much as possible into asking for help to solve a problem that they have been unable to solve themselves. We learn to view this as positive. Now the person who has "told" is transformed from a tattletale into a constructive problem solver who is bringing a problem to our attention that can be mediated. The problem will get solved and the peer mediators have a chance to practice their skills. Sometimes the problem is worked on right away and sometimes we agree on a later time that is more convenient for all who

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are involved. Even if the feelings are quite intense, this act of setting a

*\*This description and the model it refers to were co-developed with Ron Claassen of the Center for Conflict Studies & Peacemaking, Fresno (CA) Pacific College.*

time helps to calm the feelings so the persons involved can work on other things until the meeting.

Intense feelings can flare up when you least expect it. Having a structure in place to handle this really empowers the children to be in control of themselves. John was suddenly chasing Nasario around the classroom. The chase ended when Nasario caught up with John and hit him with the book he had in his hand. We quickly recognized that there was a problem here that needed to be solved. We were in the middle of a project that they also needed to be involved in so I asked them if they would be willing to discuss the problem after lunch with the peer mediators. They agreed and went back to their parts of the project. If they had not agreed, we would have continued to negotiate what we would do. My preference is for them to agree to mediation, but if they will not agree to mediation and to be cooperative, they know that the problem will go into the larger school system that allows them very little say in the solution.

The peer mediators met with Nasario and John after lunch and took them through a process that starts with each person describing

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what had happened while the other person listens well enough to be able to repeat what they have heard. The injustices both had experienced began at recess during a football game. Nasario felt John was not including him in the game enough because he had not thrown the ball to him several times when he was open. They exchanged angry words on the way back to class that escalated to each of them calling

each other a name. John was very surprised when Nasario had been so angry with him after recess. He had not deliberately left Nasario out of the game and had not really thought that much about whether or not he was open. He told Nasario right away that he was sorry for not seeing him and Nasario apologized for getting so angry.

The discussion turned to what they could both do to keep this from happening again. They decided to "check things out better" before getting mad and to be sure to throw the ball to each other at least once the next time they were out playing football. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for two days later to see how things were going and whether or not they were keeping their agreement. John and Nasario joined the rest of us proudly. They had solved their problem and were ready to be contributing members of our community again. The mediators returned proudly as well. They had helped facilitate a constructive process that had restored a relationship.

It was very exciting when, a few weeks ago, three girls in my room declared, "Mrs. Claassen, we had a problem, and we were really mad at each other, but we talked about it and solved it ourselves!" They recognized that they had been able to do something worthwhile and valuable and they were enjoying the feeling of empowerment that brought to them. We celebrated by sharing how it had all happened.

Sometimes the process seems to me to be too simple to be of that much value. But again and again the students come up with creative solutions that continue to teach me that they prefer to be helpful and constructive in their dealings with one another. The challenge is to continue to provide them with the structure that allows them to do this. This is not that difficult in my own classroom but it becomes more of a challenge in the larger school context. While the process has proven its worth to those of us who have also been involved in victim-offender reconciliation and other mediation situations, it is actually

very new and different from the usual school structures for handling problems. Finding the time to train and be available for my older, whole school mediators can be very difficult. It is the satisfaction that I sense from the students after they have had an opportunity to mediate

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together that keeps me looking for ways to continue.

When a first grader came to his teacher to tell her that a third grader had been making him throw away his breakfast tray or he would "beat" him up, she decided to refer the boys to peer mediation because she knew that they had been friends in the past. After meeting with the mediators, two eighth graders who led them through the process, they were able to walk down the hall together with renewed friendship that included agreements that had solved the problem. The third grader has his arm around the first grader, and one of the mediators said to me, "Isn't that cute? We helped them so they could be friends again." The experience of helping restore a relationship had value and meaning to all of the students involved.

Cases that involve older children can be fairly involved in complex. Three sixth grade girls were referred to peer mediation for "ongoing name calling, note writing, harassment, 'I say, you said,' etc." It is important for me to be available when this type of conflict is being worked on and it is difficult to find a block of time when five students can get together to work it through. The several sessions to work through the situation were well worth it. Here are some of the things they all agreed on to assure each other of their future intentions: *1. Come to*

*the main source instead of telling other people. 2. Don't believe rumors and don't spread rumors. 3. Go alone to the source. 4. When we look at each other we will try to smile. 5. When talking to someone, stay in the same language. 6. First find out the truth. 7. When you are talking, watch your body language and your verbal language.* A complex case sometimes means there is a complex relationship and the problem solvers may end up in mediation again. However, the process is very valuable for all who are involved because they do some deep thinking that helps make things better. They have a basis to back to for working on further difficulties.

Peer mediation is one of the most rewarding parts of teaching in the public school system. My hope is that we can become a place where our first response to a conflict of any kind will be to work at restoring rather than punishing at my school. All of the fourth, fifth, and eighth

graders know what the process is and how to use it. I am in the process of training all of the seventh graders. If I can arrange a training for the sixth graders, we will have exposed all of our upper graders to the skills and concepts. This is very exciting because it is almost like learning a new language. It is challenging because, like using a new language, it takes practice and it is often seen as easier things in the language we are more comfortable with.

The atmosphere that results is one that causes substitute teachers to leave notes like this, "Well, I enjoyed the day and was glad to be with them again. I hope you don't mind hearing this again but I can't help being amazed at how well they're coming along. I just sit and look at them while they're working and marvel at how the raw energy I saw in them as second graders is being transformed into the learning process. These kids are really going

to become educated. Keep up the good work!" I believe that is the result of children who feel like they can be in control of themselves, and children who have decided that they want to be constructive.

The training of some of the seventh and eighth graders brought comments like this: "I learned how to listen." "I learned how not to take sides." "I really enjoyed it, it was fun." "I learned how to solve a problem. I had a good time!" "My favorite part of the training was knowing that I'm going to help people with problems." "I learned how to help myself in a conflict. I liked doing this a lot. It was really fun." "I learned to tell the difference between thoughts and feelings." These students have joined in a vision for working towards restoration rather than separation. I believe they are already contributing a great deal to creating peace in our world.

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