

Restorative Principles in Practice:

Family–School Partnership



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Introduction

The practice of restorative principles provides a framework for the task of developing partnership relationships between schools and families. The present resource offers ideas and practices that will help develop and maintain respectful and collaborative partnerships in a school community.

In this first of two resources, there will be a description of restorative principles that underpin relationships of partnership. Schools in Milton Keynes have also provided examples of particular activities that reach out to engage all families in developing an environment conducive to partnership.

A second resource will be for schools already involved with a restorative training initiative. This will offer practical suggestions for staff wishing to involve families in restorative thinking and practice.

Developing a family-school partnership

As a pupil at a school and a child in a family, a student is a member of two systems, the family system and the system of the school. Each of these can operate very differently and pull the young person in different directions. A way forward is to create a partnership system out of these two distinct and sometimes disparate systems.

In a partnership system involving the school and the family working together, students will feel supported by the cooperation of adults in their lives. The more families and schools maximise their resources, the better it is for the student.

There is a great diversity among students, staff and parents. Developing a relationship context of partnership between home and school is not about making everyone the same, but about finding ways of learning and peacefully co-existing with respect and integrity.

It is important to build respectful relationships between the school and all families, whether or not family members visit the school. Creating a relationship climate of partnership involves sending a clear and consistent message that the school and the family are equally valued contributors, working together for the good of the child.

When there is a positive relationship between the family and the school, fewer problems will arise, and when they do, they will be more easily addressed and resolved. Even if teachers and parents disagree over an issue, it is not a problem when both sides are willing to listen and take each other's feedback seriously.



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Adults have a responsibility to model peaceful and respectful relations as reflected particularly in the conduct and conflict management approaches of parents, teachers and all staff in schools. The values of peace must be lived. Violence is a human tragedy and we all have to do what we can to prevent it and stop it.

What happens at school will have an impact on what happens at home and vice-versa. Unfortunately, there may be occasions when school staff and families adopt a position of judging and blaming the other for any problems that occur. Blame is a response that can block the development of an effective family-school partnership.

Principles informing partnership in practice

Restorative principles provide a framework that may guide the process of building partnership relationships. Principles inherent in a restorative ethic include the following:

Respect for difference

Building respect for the relational space between people is a priority as relationships are held together by respect for difference. We live in a socially and culturally diverse world in which difference may all too quickly become transformed into a reason for disliking or distrusting others. Differences involving **gender, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity and sexual orientation** may come to determine who exerts power in social situations and who is excluded or marginalised.

Raising awareness and sensitivity in relation to differences requires dialogue and a willingness to confront discrimination and prejudice in daily practice and in the relationship climate that is being created in a school community.

In a climate of partnership, differences will add perspective and challenge assumptions, creating and enhancing learning and development for all members of the school community.

Valuing all individuals equally

The evidence from studies in neuroscience indicates that when people do not feel valued and safe, they are more vulnerable to reactions such as 'fight' and 'flight'. When our survival is threatened, we may become flooded with feelings of fear, sadness or rage, often leading to knee-jerk reactions instead of thoughtful responses. This 'lower brain' activity may make it impossible to maintain nurturing communication and partnership connections with other people.

The area of the brain that enables people to reflect and reason most successfully is the pre-frontal cortex, which is located at the front of the top part of the brain. Engaging with this part of the brain requires a calm state of mind, with individuals feeling understood and well connected to others.

In all partnership relationships among adults and young people, the experience of being valued, and not judged or threatened in any way, will enable people to work together as effectively as possible.



Ensuring everyone has a voice and everyone is heard

When people do not have a say in what is happening, they are likely to subvert what is going on by withholding their views, or they may become actively oppositional and show their lack of co-operation in negative words or actions. When family members come into school, staff will seek to ensure each person is supported in having a voice, there are messages of welcome and appreciation, and there is a reassuring communication that this is a place where they and their children are cared about.

Partnership relationships will demonstrate the importance of conversation and of ensuring there are opportunities for the development of mutual understanding. Involvement in a circle activity enables family members, young people and staff in school to be engaged as equals in a learning process.

Partnership requires everyone to feel their views are respected and they have a say in shaping their future.

Responding to individuals as relational beings – we all affect each other

Everything we do involves relationships. These relationships can be with our own ideas, with assumptions and values, with other people, with our actions, and with groups. A complex web of relationships will influence every situation, although in moments of interaction we tend to see and judge individuals rather than see and take account of the wider picture. Negative judgments about individuals undermine and belittle relationships.

When individuals are adversely affected by the words and actions of others, it is 'the person in relationship with others' that will be the focus for a restorative way forward.

Restorative practice involves building, maintaining, and when necessary, restoring relationships of mutual respect.

Maintaining a distinction in language between showing respect for the person and responding to their actions

When responding to hurtful or harmful actions, two important and different messages may be conveyed: one that the person is respected and valued, and the other is firm opposition to their actions. By confirming a positive regard for the child, it becomes easier for parents and staff in schools to engage in collaborative conversations in which 'the problem is the problem' and not the child.

The restorative principle of separating the deed and the doer, in thinking and in language, provides a useful antidote to blaming. When a problem or an issue is regarded as internal to the person, it becomes one person's responsibility. However, when the problem is located in the outside world, it becomes a shared responsibility and others may be drawn in to support the learning and development of those most closely affected.



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Fostering a climate of family-school partnership

The creation of resilient partnership relationships will require attention to the content of what is said and done, as well as to the process of how things are said and done.

It is in the process of giving and receiving messages that the nature of the relationship is created. How things are said and done will build a relationship context that develops over time and gives meaning to every interaction.

Key questions will be:

- How are we communicating?
- What sort of relationship are we making?

Every contact between school and family will shape the nature of the family-school relationship, and the nature of the relationship will shape every contact between school and family.

Without due consideration, individuals may inadvertently create a relationship climate that is disrespectful, disengaged and excluding.

A desired relationship climate does not happen suddenly or by chance, it has to be made and re-made through all of the interaction and communication that takes place between staff and family members.

The following examples from practice represent resource ideas that schools may draw from, and add to, in seeking to build an environment of family-school partnership.

Examples from practice

The following examples from schools in Milton Keynes demonstrate an intention to build a respectful partnership in their relationships with families.

- Each foundation child in nursery and reception is given a home visit to ensure they are welcomed into the community in a secure setting. This is an opportunity for family members to ask questions and gain information before the child begins school, as well as for staff to find out information that will support the child's learning and adjustment to school – helping to build relationships and trust.
- When family members and children meet their new teacher in July, a 'bring and share' picnic is held in an informal setting. Each class holds a circle with the family members and children. The teachers introduce themselves. This has been well received and creates a positive bond from the first meeting.
- The school has an open door policy, providing an opportunity for each parent or carer to meet staff when they drop off and pick up their children. This is a way to check in with a smile and a good morning – building relationships and trust.



- Staff use modern technology such as a 'Translation App' on an iPad and 'Swype Pen' in order to provide an easy translation service for family members when English is not the language spoken at home.
- Parents and carers are invited in to see what their children have been doing in school. When English is a second language, children are often able to act as interpreters for their parents – building confidence and pride in what is being achieved.
- Website updates and blogs help parents and carers keep an eye on what the school is doing and on what is being taught. This helps build understanding and shared expectations.
- School bulletins are published each week with information about achievements in school – creating updates and celebrations that are shared between home and school.
- Home-school diaries are written and kept up to date. They are filled with comments between staff and parents/carers – valuing the voice of all.
- Information about restorative practice in school is exchanged with families using a range of activities such as: newsletters, bulletins, websites, informal conversations and whole school meetings.
- Connections are made between members of staff and families who share the same country of origin – building trust and a sense of belonging.
- 'Tell me Tuesday' – members of staff ask children and their parents/carers to comment on an aspect of school life. This is connected to the assembly theme for the week. The results from these comments and questions are then fed back into school improvement – helping to ensure that staff in school value and respect each voice in the community.
- Every child is provided with information and a target card that helps them understand the school's ethos and expected behaviours. Individual meetings are held on a weekly basis until a 'pin' is awarded when it is considered the young person confidently understands the vision – building shared understanding and agreed expectations.
- The families of children new to the school are phoned on a weekly basis to check how children and families are settling in the area. This helps to build an understanding of different circumstances and creates trusting relationships.
- Parents and carers are invited to contribute to the school curriculum with their own talents and expertise e.g. a network rail project / brain week / talks about jobs. These activities value family members and foster an expectation of sharing.
- Parents' evenings – when reviewing the child's progress and planning next steps, discussions involving staff, family members and young people create an expectation of partnership.



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- All meetings concerning a child's welfare or behaviour are held in a comfortable environment where refreshments are offered. Everyone is made welcome. Time is given to ensure all the facts are heard and everyone is able to have their say. If it is not appropriate for the child to be present, they are talked with before the meeting so that their views may be represented.
- Parents and staff plan a series of social events when members of staff and individuals from the school community prepare and provide foods that reflect their differing cultural traditions – showing respect and pride in cultural differences.
- Celebrations of work – these may take place in assemblies, during visits, or in school performances. These occasions highlight the contribution children are making and they are an opportunity to invite parents and carers into an informal setting in school.
- 'Friends of the school' arrange meetings and activities such as family trips to the cinema.
- 'Stay and Play' and 'Dads Behaving Dadly' days – these provide relaxed and welcoming opportunities for family members to experience day-to-day life in the school.

Developing a partnership with families that seem 'hard to reach'

For all schools, there will be some families who do not easily engage in a process of relationship building and partnership.

It may be difficult or even impossible for some families to get to school. School events may conflict with work or with other commitments. Parents may have young children or elderly relatives who cannot be left alone or in school-provided child-care. Families may experience significant difficulties with the language of the school, making the process of communicating a potentially frustrating and dis-empowering experience. Parents and carers may be reluctant to come into school until they feel certain that neither they nor their child will be blamed or put on the spot. Some family members may be acting within a context of negativity and avoidance informed by their own unhappy experience of school.

Some of the additional ways in which schools in Milton Keynes have sought to create a partnership with families that seem hard to reach have been:

- Social time – parents and carers are invited into school for coffee mornings or for afternoon teas – helping to create a sense of connection and belonging.
- 'Mother and tots' sessions – this is similar to social time but with a focus on child-care and support for mothers.
- Themed coffee afternoons are arranged to offer particular information and advice on topics such as medical issues, communication difficulties and support for pupils with special educational needs.



- Festivals and Charity events – families are invited to join festivals and charity events that are entertaining and non-threatening.
- The families of some children are phoned once a week to create a connection between home and school and to share information about the child's progress.
- Parents and carers who do not attend a planned meeting are contacted (by phone, text, email) to discuss their situation. A positive message is conveyed and plans are made to ensure information is exchanged and dialogue maintained when it is not possible for the parent/carer to come into school.
- Supply dinners are provided that may be taken home and warmed up for homeless families living in temporary housing with limited cooking facilities.
- The school pays for children's lunches while benefits are sorted out without any arrears being owed.

Summary and Conclusions

Every interaction between school and home provides an opportunity to create an experience and an expectation of partnership. Building a partnership relationship will mean that restorative principles are reflected in what is said and done and in how things are said and done.

Restorative Principles include:

- Respect for difference
- Valuing all individuals equally
- Ensuring everyone has a voice and everyone is heard
- Responding to individuals as relational beings – we all affect each other
- Maintaining a distinction in language between respect for the person and creative responses to words and actions

Examples of practice from schools in Milton Keynes demonstrate how responsibility, care, commitment and creativity are helping to build and maintain partnership relationships. In their communication and interaction with families, these schools are demonstrating how restorative principles are reflected in practices that:

- Build respect for relationships and for all communication between people
- Provide experiences of being valued and not judged or threatened in any way
- Convey a clear and consistent message that this is a place where families and children are cared about and valued
- Build, maintain, and when necessary, restore relationships of mutual respect
- Regard problems as a shared responsibility
- Value conversation and opportunities to develop mutual understanding
- Endeavour to support each person in having their voice heard



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Restorative principles guide the development of a respectful climate in school and they will inform those activities that build a relationship of partnership between staff and families in the school community.

A respectful partnership between home and school creates optimal conditions for all learning and development.

Partnership in the Curriculum

It is important for schools to collaborate with families in all areas of the curriculum.

For schools that are involved with a Restorative Foundation Training Programme, the second part of this Family Partnership Resource will provide specific ideas on sharing restorative thinking and practice with families. The framework for this practice will relate to the social and emotional curriculum.

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With particular thanks to the following schools in Milton Keynes:
Brooklands Farm School, Greenleys Junior School, Slated Row Special School, Knowles Primary School
and to Illustrator: Katy Dynes

