



Restorative Practices and Parenting

By Nikki Schmidt

Using restorative practices in our families can help strengthen communication and instill the skills in our children to become empathetic and effective problem solvers. Often as parents we impose an arbitrary decision or punishment upon our children in order to stop the conflict, however, if children are coached in being accountable for their actions, thinking of solutions themselves, and building the relationship with their conflict partner the decision will often times be more effective at restoring harmony than our forced resolution.

Therefore, below are 5 quick steps for Implementing Restorative Practices into your family interactions.

1. Encourage Responsibility

As parents we can help our children be accountable for their actions by using responsible language and encouraging them to use it as well. Catch yourself saying “I have to go to work,” or “We have to go to Grandma’s house,” and instead rephrase with an “I choose” phrase. “I choose to go to work because providing for my family is important to me,” or “We are choosing to go to Grandma’s because it is important to me around the holidays to have

our family together.” Saying “I have to . . .” implies responding to something out of our control when, really, life is full of choices that we take part in everyday. Furthermore, understanding the impact of an action, seeing it as a consequence of choices, and helping to decide how to put things right is a huge step in helping kids be responsible and solve problems.

2. Focus on the Relationship vs. The Rule Broken

When there is a conflict between your children the first question you can ask is: “What happened and what was the harm done?” Once that question has been answered you can then ask: “Who was responsible?” and then finally “What needs to be done to repair the harm?” Asking these questions encourages kids to right the relationship where trust has been diminished and emphasizes building the relationship between the conflict partners. Keeping the goal of building the relationship in mind also helps reintegrate the offender of the relationship back into family interactions without unnecessarily imposing shame.

3. Focus on Problem-Solving

Effective problem-solving involves identifying the problem by expressing feelings and needs rather than blaming the other person. Make sure you help the kids differentiate between their positions vs. their interests or needs. One youth insisting that the other leave the room is a position when the need might actually be that the youth needs peace and quiet when they are reading.

Once the problem has been identified then move into brainstorming without evaluation--all ideas are written down no matter how wild or unpractical because who knows, one of those ideas may spur another great idea. Once brainstorming is finished then the kids can evaluate which idea will meet each other's needs, build the relationship, and ultimately solve the problem.

If the solution fails to solve the problem then go back to brainstorming and choose a different idea. In fact, make brainstorming a family habit--brainstorm where to spend the day, what to plan for the week's meals, or what to name the family pet to encourage creativity and making brainstorming easier for the more complicated conflicts.

4. Emphasize Dialogue and Negotiation

Start encouraging your kids to see conflict as being a win-win opportunity instead of the traditional win-lose mentality by using dialogue and negotiation. Dialogue, in its most basic form, is an exchange of opinions and ideas

without the intent to convince the other party of right or wrong. Using open dialogue to freely express feelings and opinions and then utilizing negotiation to help get needs met encourages kids to understand that sometimes to get what they want they need to compromise and distinguish between what they want and what they actually need.

5. Encourage All Those Involved to Participate

Bring all those involved into the conversation and for added family or community building use Talking Pieces. Anything can be a Talking Piece and the person holding the Talking Piece is the only person who is allowed to speak. Be creative with your Talking Piece--perhaps hold a family craft night making and designing your family's talking piece (several families have decorated a tile or piece of linoleum signifying that a "person has the floor" when they are holding the Talking Piece). This method gives voice to everyone and empowers even the most quiet of individuals to open up and share their thoughts.

Not every day will be a "restorative practices" parenting day as the complexities, stress, and emotions of family living can create the proverbial "bad" day. Still, remind yourself and start teaching your children that regardless of how out of control you may feel in certain situations, the one thing you do have control over is how you will respond to the situation. Keeping this in mind and utilizing more conflict and anger management skills will help create more "better" days in our life's journeys.