

# Holistic Discipline

By Ron Claassen

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Restorative justice is providing a framework or way of approaching misbehavior and conflict in areas beyond criminal justice. I have hope that someday restorative justice will be what people think of when they think of justice. Maybe someday we will have to explain to our children and grandchildren that there was a time when most people thought that justice was retributive justice.

The example that is giving me the most hope now is one that Roxanne (my wife of 30 years who teaches eighth grade at Raisin City School) and I have been working on for nearly 10 years. Roxanne completed her BA with a major in conflict and peacemaking and is now halfway to completing her MA in conflict management and peacemaking. Her interest is in utilizing restorative justice to guide how she would deal with conflict and misbehavior in her classroom.

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At first those who watched her thought she was "soft" on misbehavior. But, as the principal and other teachers noticed, her approach not only reduced the misbehavior, it began to transform the climate in her classroom. In some very ironic ways, it became more acceptable to disagree with each other, but the disagreements became occasions to understand each other better, to negotiate and to learn better ways of being together rather than occasions to put people down or hurt each other. So it became increasingly clear that her method which we called Discipline That Restores (DTR) was not "soft" on misbehavior.

At about the same time that Roxanne started DTR in her classroom (with administration skepticism and blessing), the administration had decided it was necessary to get "tough." The hope was that if discipline was "tougher" it would stop what seemed to be a schoolwide trend

toward increasing misbehavior, conflicts among students, disrespect for teachers, and fights on campus. So the school-wide system called for increasing punishment: more warnings and detentions followed by more suspensions and expulsions. What happened was that the overall climate became more tense, less cooperative and more stressful for everyone.

At the beginning of the next year, with new administrative leadership, we were invited to provide some training for the entire staff on DTR. We started by exploring together what each teacher hoped to accomplish with his or her discipline preference. Interestingly, teachers with very different approaches hoped to accomplish very similar results. Everyone agreed that they wanted students to learn respect. They all wanted students to learn to get along better, to be able to solve their problems by talking rather than by hitting. So when we looked at DTR principle #4 it made sense. It says, "DTR recognizes both the danger and opportunity created by the misbehavior and conflicts that underlie the misbehavior. As soon as immediate safety concerns are satisfied, DTR views misbehavior and conflict as a teachable moment." The teachers all shared restorative goals.

Roxanne starts each school year by having her students write what they would do if they were showing respect for each other, for the teacher, and for the books and furniture, and what the teacher would do if the teacher were showing respect for the students. She also writes down her thoughts and then makes a composite of all of their ideas and asks students to consider if this is the kind of classroom they would like and if they are willing to make a commitment to be this way together. After they rework some of the items together, they are all invited to sign this as an agreement for how they will be together. When they forget, she reminds them of the agreement, and if the problem persists, she invites them to meet with her to see if they can cooperatively find a way to solve the problem that is keeping them from being able to keep the agreement. She tells them that she would rather never exert her power to control them and that she won't unless they refuse to try solving the problem cooperatively.

Some students actually ask her if she would just punish them because then they wouldn't have to keep making these agreements that they are expected to keep. But when she actually sets about doing this, they change their minds and decide they really want to cooperate. They appreciate the opportunity to share the power with her in making agreements that are good for both.

Currently, all teachers at Raisin City School have an opportunity to participate in at least four full days of training in DTR principles and the strategies and skills to implement it. The school handbook says their discipline system is "Discipline That Restores."

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One of her eighth-grade students from last year is now a student at Cauthers High School. In the first week she reported that at lunch one day everyone suddenly started yelling "fight, fight!" and running to get a closer view. When she looked around at those who were still seated at the tables, most of them were Raisin City students. Cheering on fights was not part of their experience.

One other piece of good news this year is that 40 percent of the Raisin City students who are first year students at Cauthers High School are on the honor roll. Maybe the cooperation carries over to learning the academic subjects as well.

This could be happening in all of our schools. This success at Raisin City School gives me hope that our community could become a safe, peaceful and respectful place to be. It could be a place where misbehavior, disagreements and conflicts are viewed as opportunities to learn to know each other better and as occasions where fairness and justice can be negotiated in an atmosphere where all people are valued.

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#### **"DISCIPLINE THAT RESTORES" PRINCIPLES**

1. Misbehavior is viewed primarily as an offense against human relationships and secondarily as a violation of a school rule (since school rules are written to protect safety and fairness in human relationships).
2. The primary victim of the misbehavior is the one most impacted by the offense. The secondary victims are others impacted by the misbehavior and might include students, teachers, parents, administration, community, etc.
3. Discipline That Restores (DTR) is a process to "make things as right as possible."
4. DTR recognizes both the danger and opportunity created by the misbehavior and conflicts that underlie the misbehavior. As soon as immediate safety concerns are satisfied, DTR views the misbehavior and conflict as a teachable moment.
5. DTR prefers resolving the conflict or handling the misbehavior at the earliest point possible and with the maximum amount of cooperation possible (as little coercive force as possible).
6. DTR prefers that most conflicts and misbehavior are handled using a cooperative structure directly between the ones in conflict.
7. DTR recognizes that not all persons misbehaving will choose to be cooperative. Therefore there is a need for outside authority to make decisions for the misbehaving person who is not willing to be cooperative. The consequences imposed should be tested by whether they are reasonable, related, restorative and respectful.
8. DTR prefers that persons who misbehave and are not yet cooperative be continually invited (not coerced) and encouraged to become responsible and cooperative, and they should be given that opportunity at the earliest possible time they so choose.
9. DTR requires follow-up and accountability structures since keeping agreements is the key to building a trusting community.

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