

From Principles To Practice

By Roxanne Claassen

Roxanne is currently the eighth grade teacher at Raisin City Elementary School. Roxanne initiated, developed, and continues to train and administer the peer mediation program at her school. In addition she has pioneered a school-wide discipline program called *Discipline That Restores* which she developed with her husband, Ron.

I am an eighth grade teacher. My husband, Ron, is co-director of the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University. We very much enjoy working together whenever we get the opportunity. One way we create opportunity is by consciously putting our peacemaking theology into practice in our relationship and our occupations. Ron develops the theory, strategies and structures. I use them in my classroom, and this makes teaching and working on problems with students fun and energizing. This strategy encourages a cooperative process and does not ignore bad behavior. It assumes that when there is a bad behavior, there is an opportunity for some teaching and learning for all involved in the conflict (including me, the teacher).

Ron and I have both worked in various capacities for the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP). When I began teaching, we noticed that what we do at school is very similar to what we do in the criminal justice system. Working with VORP had taught us that there are ways to achieve recognition and empowerment which can lead to new ways of relating to each other that are constructive rather than destructive. We saw that at school there were rules. This is good because rules are important. But when a rule was violated, there was a punishment. That punishment may or may not be related to the problem and the child being punished could just take the punishment without making any changes. This means that some children break the rules over and over, are punished over and over and never figure out what to do differently so this won't keep happening to them.

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During this time, Ron had been working on restorative justice. As we talked and as I struggled with putting my peacemaking theology into practice in my classroom, he wrote the Principles of Discipline That Restores (see page 3), which describe what I was trying to do. Since that time we have also written a curriculum called "Making Things Right." Raisin City Elementary, the K-8 school where I teach, adopted these principles about seven years ago. They

have been incredibly helpful and have led to a more peaceful school climate, a climate in which teachers, students, administrators and parents regularly sit down together to solve problems constructively.

Some, if not most, of the problems students have with each other are not really problems caused by school but problems caused by relationship issues. Judy and Lisa had been good friends. When both of them became interested in the same boy, conflict developed. Judy did not see Lisa as a friend but as a threat to her relationship with Joshua. Lisa and Joshua were in the same class so they had a natural setting in which they were together. Even though Joshua was clearly interested in Judy being his girlfriend, he also had a friendly relationship with his classmate Lisa. When conflict developed, none of them had many strategies they could use to deal with it. Name calling and "dogging" began at school. This eventually led to Lisa making harassing phone calls to Judy's house. The school was unaware of any of this until Judy's mom came to talk to someone who she thought might be able to help with the problem. Luckily our school has a Discipline That Restores structure in place. Since I am the mediation coordinator, I was asked to get in touch with the girls and their mothers to arrange a meeting that would bring the problems out into the open so they could be discussed and resolved. This is an example of the first Principle of Discipline That Restores, which states, "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)."

I had individual meetings with all involved. Principle 2 says, "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." It was with relief that a meeting was arranged. This was a somewhat complicated situation because so many people had become part of the conflict. Mothers were upset as well as Lisa's sister. All were suspicious of each other. Lisa was quite

surprised to see how much anxiety and chaos she had created not just for Judy and Judy's family but also for her own family. The situation was very close to being turned over to the police. As all told their stories and listened to each other, the mothers began to relax and understanding grew. They told their daughters how upsetting it was for them to be "called before the school" to deal with all of this. This gave "the school" the chance to say we did not view this at all as being "called before us" but as people who cared about one another coming together as community to work at resolution. Besides, it was Judy's mom who had invited us to become involved and we were grateful to her for caring enough to want to work on the problem. The mothers really relaxed at this point and turned things over to their daughters to work out.

Principle 3 says, "Discipline That Restores (DTR) is a process to 'make things as right as possible.'" As the girls listened to each other, they made genuine apologies for the name calling, "dogging" and harassing phone calls. The girls agreed to not call each other on the phone to harass.

Principle 4 says, "DTR recognizes both the danger and opportunity created by the misbehavior and conflicts that underlie misbehavior. As soon as immediate safety concerns are satisfied, DTR views the misbehavior and conflict as a teachable moment." The girls recognized that what they were doing was causing them to misbehave at school and at home and that this destructive behavior would lead to consequences that they did not want.

Principle 5 says, "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)." And Principle 6 says, "DTR prefers that most conflicts and misbehavior are handled using a cooperative structure directly between the ones in conflict." Sitting down with the structure of mediation allowed them to choose the consequences they wanted. They wanted constructive things to happen. Besides agreeing not to call each other to harass, they agreed to spend time talking to each other to check out rumors directly when their friends were telling them "things." They also recognized their past friendship and made a decision to work on that again. The formal process and structure gave them a way to work at that in a protected setting

for a period of time since the agreement ended with some built-in times of follow-up. Judy and Lisa had been heading in a direction that in most schools would have led to suspension and perhaps expulsion if the problem had continued to escalate. Because Raisin City Elementary School has a Discipline That Restores plan, their behavior led to problem-solving, accountability and responsibility.

Had Judy and Lisa not been cooperative, Principles 7 and 8 would have gone into effect. Principle 7 says, "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." Principle 8 says, "DTR prefers that persons who misbehave and are not yet cooperative be continually invited and encouraged to become responsible and cooperative and they should be given that opportunity at the earliest possible time they so choose." It is very rare that students choose to not be cooperative. They are usually very willing to participate in the structure of cooperation.

I am not sure what happens to students when they leave this as a deliberate structure. I have noticed that students from our school are on the honor roll at the rate of between 33 percent and 45 percent of the graduating class, indicating that students have learned to be responsible and accountable. Younger brothers and sisters also tell me they have seen what we are doing before they get to eighth grade. This shows that students value what they have learned and experienced so much they have put it to use outside of the school setting. I know that when students choose to be constructive and cooperative rather than destructive and uncooperative they each take excellent tools with them that will help them with relationships throughout their lives. ●

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on "Discipline That Restores" Principles, "Making Things Right" curriculum, and other teaching aides, check the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies website at www.fresno.edu/dept/pacs or write the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies, Fresno Pacific University, 1717 S. Chestnut, Fresno, CA 93702.