



Class counsel

Long used in the juvenile justice system and high schools, restorative justice techniques are now teaching much younger children about responsibility and conflict management. By Kate Hamilton.

At Birchgrove Public School, teacher Christine Deans is discussing responsibility with the circle of children seated at her feet. This is class 1D, one-term veterans of the rough and tumble of “big” school, and today they are talking about one of the class rules: manage your own behaviour. The children pass a slice of toy watermelon to indicate who has the “voice space” as they reflect on the class’s first attempt at independent group work – making a model of Sydney’s Rocks area – and why their project went, as Deans says, “very wrong indeed”.

Deans asks someone to explain what happened. Natalie, from the group building the Harbour Bridge, breathlessly awaits her chance to speak. “We were doing well and we were measuring it,” she says at last, “then one person thought being silly was a good

thing to try and then a lot of people were being silly and we didn’t get any of it done.”

Deans directs her next question at the group. “Was anyone sad because of what happened on Thursday afternoon? Thomas?”

“I didn’t have my hand up, I was just scratching my head,” says Thomas, one of two bridge-builders who “resigned” during Thursday’s fracas. However, with some encouragement he concurs: “I was upset because everyone was not co-operating.”

Deans explains, “We had a class conference and the children decided to go home and discuss the problems they were having with their parents. We talked again on Friday morning and by the afternoon, this had happened,” she says, unveiling the completed three-dimensional cardboard bridge. When asked what changed, Will shoots his hand

skyward. “We were thinking and talking,” he says.

Birchgrove Public, perched above the waters of Sydney Harbour, is one of a growing number of primary schools in Sydney and Melbourne that are using an approach known as restorative justice.

Restorative justice aims to deal with minor and more serious wrongdoings without apportioning blame, using shame or isolating the offenders. It first appeared in Australia in the early 1990s, with a program run by the police in the NSW town of Wagga Wagga, aimed at diverting juvenile offenders from courts and prison.

While it is nothing new in the area of criminal justice, its application in an educational context is recent. Trials of restorative justice in schools began in Queensland in the mid-’90s and were introduced into schools in NSW in 1997, where

the techniques were mainly used to combat bullying. By bringing together the children, parents, teachers and friends to discuss a problem, “conferencing” was a successful alternative to suspending or excluding pupils. The aim was to repair relationships – and results suggested it was succeeding.

It’s lunchtime at Birchgrove Public and the walking wounded arrive from the tumult of the playground, hand in hand with their carers. The school’s “buddy” program pairs year 6 students with preschoolers as part of its focus on relationships. Playground rescue is just one element of the job for the senior students.

Outside the office, a big buddy pats the arm of his tiny, tear-stained charge. Principal Pam Wood ushers them to the first-aid station where bruised fingers are iced and grazed knees anointed. “Mostly they’re just after a bit of TLC,” says Wood.

One hundred years ago, within these same walls, children were doubtless treated with somewhat less TLC and somewhat more of the cane. While corporal punishment has been banned in schools in most Australian states and territories since the mid-1990s, the search for ways to manage unruly kids continues.

Of the “punitive authoritarian model” of teaching, Maurizio Vespa, restorative justice co-ordinator at Marist Youth Care, says, “Our kids don’t respond any more. It’s like waving a red flag at a bull, leading to revenge and further battles. When kids realise you’re not out to harm them, it evokes a different response.”

Birchgrove Public saw detention and suspension were escalating, rather than preventing, behavioural problems. The need for a major shift was clear to Wood. “When I first came to the school, there was a constant line of children outside my office,” she says. “They were angry, frustrated and upset. I knew we needed to do something big if we were going to make the school a better place for everyone.”

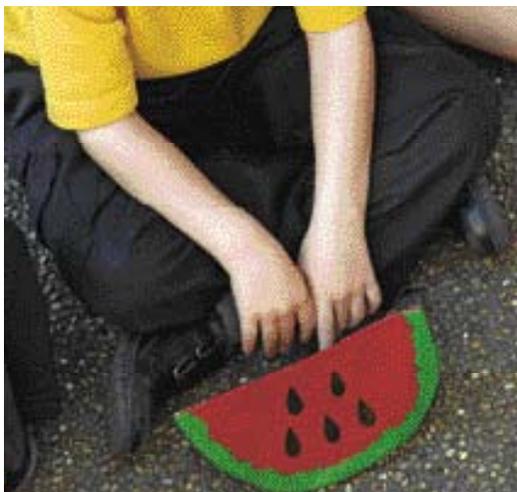
In 2005, Birchgrove Public held workshops for teachers, students and parents, run by former police officer Terry O’Connell, the man behind the original Wagga Wagga conferencing program and director of Real Justice. The workshops for children use stories to encourage them to reflect on how things go wrong and what they can do to make things right. In “Mary finds some money”, for example, Mary finds \$200 on the footpath. She’s thinking about what to spend it on – toys, a puppy, ice-cream – but when she sees her mum, she feels unhappy.

The theory is that asking what are known as Socratic questions such as, “How is Mary feeling?” rather than “blaming” questions such as, “Why did Mary do that?” encourages children to reflect. By using the same questions when things go wrong in their own lives, they realise how their behaviour affects others, building empathy and responsibility.

Margaret Thorsborne facilitated Australia’s first school-based restorative justice conference in 1994, at Maroochydore State High School in Queensland, after a gang attacked a student at an end-of-year social. “The boy who was assaulted was badly traumatised,” says Thorsborne, then the school’s guidance officer. “He wouldn’t come back to school or even venture to the local shopping centre because



I used to think kids would want other kids to be punished but 99 per cent just want a ‘Sorry.’”



he was afraid that he’d be set upon again.”

The offending students were suspended but that didn’t solve the problem for the victim. “So I facilitated my first clumsy attempt [at a conference],” says Thorsborne. “But even with the clumsiness, it worked. The boys were able to reassure the victim that he would be OK and he was.”

A 12-month pilot in Queensland schools followed. More than 90 per cent of the victims felt safer and more than 80 per cent of the offenders did not re-offend during the trial period. “It’s not about going soft on kids,” says Thorsborne. “Most kids would rather stand in the sun with a knot of garlic around their neck than have their family and members of their school community in the same room, talking together about the harm they’ve done.”

At Birchgrove Public, the restorative philosophy – democratic and focused on relationships – informs

everything that goes on in the classrooms, the staffroom and the playground. Children as young as those in 1D are taught to voice their opinions and feelings and to listen to others. “Circle time”, in which students and teacher take turns to speak while the rest of the group listens, is an integral part of the restorative classroom. Many teachers use circle time to solve conflicts or as a way to start the day; others use the circle to reflect collectively on class work.

“In any situation, the loudest voice tends to be the one that gets heard,” says year 4 teacher Di Ford. “It doesn’t necessarily mean they’ve got the best ideas.” She says the circles “underpin the idea that you can take a risk and you won’t be put down for it”.

Every child at the school has a set of cards printed with restorative questions such as “What happened?” “What were you thinking at the time?” “Who has been affected?” “What do you think needs to happen to make things right?” The same questions are on display in the classrooms and in the playground. According to Ford, it’s not unusual to see a knot of children, negotiating their issues, cards in hand.

“They’ll say to each other, ‘Who have you harmed by doing this?’ and they’ll work it out among themselves,” says Ford. “I used to think that kids would want other kids to be punished but in fact 99 per cent of children want the behaviour to stop and the child to say, ‘Sorry.’ Restorative justice gives them the skills to manage that.”

By the end of 2005, the first year of restorative justice at Birchgrove Public, referrals to the time-out room for playground misbehaviour dropped by 23 per cent and for bullying incidents by 39 per cent. The following year, the time-out room was shelved, as students and teachers got better at dealing with problems before they escalated.

According to former police officer Peta Blood, one of the pioneers at Wagga Wagga and founder of training organisation Circle Speak, some teachers struggle with the shift in power in the classroom, from an authoritarian style to one of shared responsibility. “For most kids, it’s a breath of fresh air, a sense of finally being listened to. But for the teachers, it’s not easy work,” she says. “It challenges who we are as people. You can’t be restorative at work and then go home and be something else.”

Year 6 students Dylan, Emily and Siobhan say Birchgrove’s approach to problem-solving is a fair one. “At my old school, they don’t use it,” says 11-year-old Dylan. “You get in trouble, they yell at you, you get sad. It’s fairer here.” All three say they use the restorative questions when things go wrong.

The number of suspensions at the school has been dropping for the past three years, with none recorded in 2006 and only a few recorded this year.

According to Margaret Thorsborne, the role of the school is changing. “I’m a strong believer in the idea that it takes a village to raise a child,” she says. “Many children no longer have their extended family or strong links to their community. School must become that community. It’s no longer possible just to teach maths. We must also teach kids to be good, decent, responsible, caring, empathic people.” ●