

Getting Tough or Getting Together

A model of engagement

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A group of professionals in the Wodonga region in north east Victoria have formed a partnership to deliver a unique model of improving young peoples' engagement with school and the community and providing support services to their families. To find out more, Robyn Parker talked with members of the network of professionals who run the program: Shandell Blythe (Gateway Community Health); Leading Senior Constable Kevin Mack (Youth Resource Officer, Victoria Police); Margaret Hunter (Gateway Community Health); and Alyson Miller (Assistant Principal, Wodonga Middle Years Campus).

The limited effectiveness of established methods of dealing with antisocial behaviour in schools, such as suspension or exclusion, has led to the adoption of alternative ways of resolving conflict or repairing harm caused by the actions of one student against another. One alternative, the use of restorative practices, is well embedded in some schools. The "restorative practices" framework emerged from the field of restorative justice, in which the victim and the offender are placed at the centre of the criminal justice process. In a typical "restorative justice" process the parties affected by harmful behaviour meet in order to seek a common understanding of what has happened and to reach an agreement as to how best to deal with the aftermath. Restorative practices are an application of this model to fields outside of criminal justice (Watchel & McCold, 2004).

Family and Community Group Conferencing is another approach (see Case Study). It is an established family-centred, strengths-focused, culturally sensitive and community-based approach to family decision-making and case planning. It helps to engage and empower families to make decisions that protect and support their children.¹ In the Getting Tough or Getting Together context, appropriate members of the community are also recruited as support for the family. Professionals play a critical role facilitating the decision-making process through information, resources and expertise.

In a small number of schools in the Wodonga region restorative practices have been combined with Family and Community Group Conferencing, provided to schools in the Upper Hume region through the School Focused Youth Service. This has created a unique strengths-based program in which the focus is not only on the individual and the antisocial behaviour but also on the broader context in which the behaviour occurred. The student and their family play a central role in a decision-making process that is supportive rather than punitive.

Background

The integration of restorative practices and family and community group conferencing into the Getting Tough or Getting Together program emerged when it was observed that the same student was the focus of both a restorative conference and a family and community group conference on the same day. It was quickly realised that integrating the two approaches offered the potential to maximise the benefits to the student, school and community, as well as make efficient use of the resources available through the school and community agencies.

One of the driving forces behind the Getting Tough or Getting Together model is Judy Davis, coordinator of the School Focused Youth Service. Her role is to facilitate strong, sustainable partnerships between local schools, families and the community to improve the capacity of service organisations and schools to respond effectively to youth crime, disengagement and truancy and the increasingly complex needs of families presenting to services. The family and community group conferencing approach aims to create a supportive environment in which decisions can be made and their outcomes sustained. It involves consultation with all parties who have an interest in the wellbeing of the young person, a meeting to discuss proposed ways of identifying and addressing current issues for the individual and the family, and the development and implementation of a plan of action.

The merger of two local secondary colleges was also a catalyst for bringing these two complementary practices together. In the face of an increase in antisocial behaviour both within the school and in the community, the school and the police recognised the need to take a more united approach. Staff members at the school were already trained in restorative principles, and it had become the foundation of their methods of student management. One of the indicators of its success is the acceptance by the student body who, when a conflict arises, often ask staff to "hold a restorative" to help them resolve the issue before it escalates. Adding family and community group conferencing to this process created the potential for sustainable change not only for the student and their family, but also for the school and the community.

¹ See <www.dhcs.act.gov.au/ocys/services/family_engagement_unit>

What distinguishes Getting Tough or Getting Together from the typical application of Family and Community Group Conferencing is the level of commitment, coordination and sharing of information and resources among the members of the partnership. The police, schools, health and community service agencies all work in concert to secure whatever complementary support and resources are needed to assist the student and their family. There are no service provision “silos” in the partnership, so the agencies are able to work with each other to ensure the best possible outcomes for the student and their family.

Currently, three primary and two secondary schools in the region employ the Getting Tough or Getting Together model.

The program

The aims of the program are to:

- prevent exclusion from school for disruptive students;
- keep them engaged in school activities or identify and implement suitable alternatives;
- help them maintain healthy engagement with their family and the community; and
- provide access to relevant services for the family.

Typically, an incident at school triggers a restorative conference aimed at securing an apology from the offender and repairing the harm to the victim. During the process of extensive consultation leading up to the restorative conference the Convenor tries to identify the factors that contributed to the incident or aspects of the student’s life that may be impacting on his or her behaviour at school. Based on what is learned, the Convenor may then decide that the addition of a Family and Community Group Conference will be of benefit to the student and his or her family. After further consultation a conference will be held, attended by the student, family members, representatives of the school, police, and family relationship service providers, and other members of the student’s extended family or friends or the community (for example, a sports coach) who have agreed to participate and who will take an active role in supporting the student. The Convenor of the restorative conference at the school may not necessarily be the Convenor of the Family and Community Group Conference. The network of partners to the program is able to draw on a pool of facilitators as required.

All parties to the Family and Community Group Conference are required to maintain strict confidentiality since, during a conference, a range of issues such as family breakdown or violence may be uncovered. Ways of dealing with whatever issues emerge are examined during the conference and a plan of action drawn up. Counselling or mediation might be arranged for the whole family, or just for the parents. Family friends or community members in attendance may offer alternative accommodation or to spend time with the young person to provide respite for both the young person and their family. A sports coach may offer to mentor the student and give them a greater role or responsibility in the club. It may be determined that the student would benefit from attending a different school, attending part time, or going to TAFE. Commitment to each component of the plan is secured. The coordinated and cooperative nature of the response from the partners in Getting Tough or Getting Together is critical in securing the various supports and resources.

Case study

Jake (not his real name), a 15 year old, is involved in the serious assault of another student, breaking his nose. A restorative conference is held at the school to address the harm and secure an apology from Jake to the other young person. During the preparation for the restorative meeting the Convenors learn that Jake has been exposed to family violence while his parents lived together. They also learn that, due to the assault, he is to be “exited” from the school for the remainder of the year.

Jake’s parents are currently separated and experience conflict in their communication around the children and how they spend time with either parent. The father is frustrated in his relationship with his son and is at the point of asking him to leave home and possibly move into alternative accommodation.

A family and community group conference is held after the restorative conference to make decisions as to how Jake will be engaged with his learning while not attending school. The conference is attended by the police, the assistant school Principal, community agency supports, Jake’s two siblings,

his parents, his boxing coach and a family friend who offers for Jake to spend respite time with his family as opposed to leaving home. The parents put aside their differences to develop plans of support for Jake.

Planned outcomes

Short term:

- Jake apologises to the young person he assaulted.
- Jake commits to undertaking work at home to carry him through to the end of the school year.
- Jake commits to using his boxing skills wisely and not engage in violence.
- Jake has opened up an opportunity to spend time with his mother (something he is keen to progress).
- Jake is to spend time with his family friend and will remain living at home.

Long term:

- Jake to return to school and transition to the Senior School.

Family and Community Group conferences are extremely time intensive. The Convenor and those professionals and others who participate undertake a great deal of consultation, planning and preparation. Follow up conferences might also be scheduled to build on the original plan and support the continued engagement of the student with their family and school, and prevent further incidents.

Outcomes

Combining restorative principles with family and community group conferencing allowed the formation of a strong partnership of professionals and community members able to facilitate sustainable change in the lives of individuals, families and communities. One school in the area has seen improvements in student behaviour and in relations with parents. There are fewer expulsions and suspensions, less criminal activity and less truancy. School staff have received requests for other school-related assistance from parents who, prior to participating in the Getting Tough or Getting Together process, were mistrustful of the school and had very little positive interaction with staff. The process also helps parents understand the effect of their behaviour on their children and helps parents and families identify and receive a range of support services. Benefits have also flowed on to service providers, with better coordination and utilisation of services. The program is strongly supported by the Centre for Adolescent Health, and the network has begun a research and evaluation partnership with Deakin University and the Australian Catholic University. While existing data are preliminary, the indications are that the program has the potential to bring about significant, sustainable positive change for young people and their families.

Contact

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Reference

Watchel, T., & McCold, P. (2004, August). *From restorative justice to restorative practices: Expanding the paradigm*. Paper presented at the International Institute for Restorative Practices 5th International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices, Vancouver, Canada.

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Restorative practices resources

International Institute of Restorative Practices

The International Institute for Restorative Practices is dedicated to the advanced education of professionals at the graduate level and to the conduct of research that can develop the growing field of restorative practices, with the goal of positively influencing human behaviour and strengthening civil society throughout the world. The site includes an online searchable database of articles and conference papers on restorative practices. There is also access to a network of professionals interested in restorative practices via an e-forum. To find out more, visit www.iirp.org.

Schools in Action

An inner city primary school included the use of restorative practices as part of a wider strategy to improve cooperation and participation among students, teachers, parents and the community. To find out more, go to www.bullyingnoway.com.au/ideasbox/schools/Default.asp?RequestId=222

Developing restorative practices in schools: Flavour of the month or saviour of the system?

(2003). Wendy Drewery & John Winslade. School of Education, University of Waikato, New Zealand.

This paper reports on two projects on restorative conferencing in schools undertaken by a team at the

University of Waikato for the Ministry of Education, under the rubric of the Suspension Reduction Initiative. The projects included developing and trialling processes for suspension hearings using restorative conferencing and principles from restorative justice. Objectives of both projects were related to the desire to reduce numbers of suspensions and exclusions, particularly of Maori children. This paper reports on these two projects, and reflects on some of the questions they raised. The report is available at www.aare.edu.au/03pap/dre03675.pdf.

Family & community group conferencing resources

Family group conferencing in Australia 15 years on (Child Abuse Prevention Issues No. 27). (2008). Nathan Harris.

This paper examines the degree of implementation and use of conferencing in Australian states and territories in the area of child protection. The paper is available at www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues27/issues27.html.

The ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services Family Engagement Unit

provides information on family group conferencing, standards for their conduct, and a literature review. These resources can be found at www.dhcs.act.gov.au/ocyfs/services/family_engagement_unit.