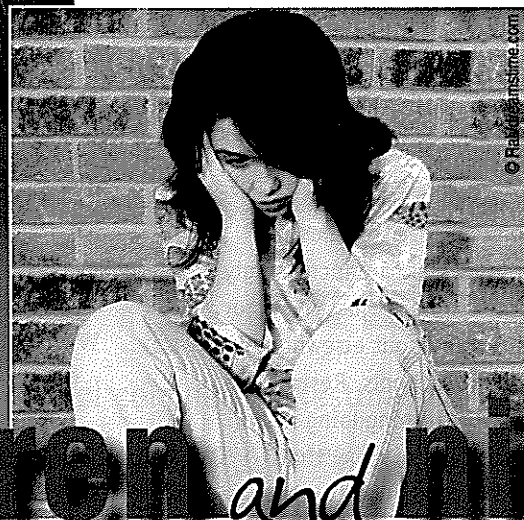


When a schoolgirl misunderstanding escalated into abuse, a Lutheran college used restorative practices to make things right



## lauren and niki

by Steve Brady

**The mother's voice sounded tentative and laced with fear: 'I'm not sure we should do this. I don't want things to get worse.'**

I certainly didn't want things to get worse either. As the counsellor at St Andrews Lutheran College, a P-12 college on the Gold Coast, I had listened to her daughter Lauren\*, a Year 9 student, tearfully and fearfully tell me a disturbing story of harassment and vilification by a fellow student. Most of the abuse took place during exchanges on MSN, an instant internet messaging network, which is hugely popular with students.

Over and over, what started out as friendly and inviting conversations would erupt in foul tirades. Lauren would cry as she struggled to understand why her friend Niki\* had turned

on her so viciously.

In many ways it was a foul story that unfortunately typifies the challenges school staff face in our ubiquitously wired yet increasingly disconnected world. It was to become, however, one of the most profoundly sacred stories in my nearly ten years at the college.

Lauren's mother was worried that the intervention we were planning to support her daughter and deal with Niki's offending behaviours would lead to retribution by Niki and her friends, and even more suffering for Lauren.

But we had to do something. The abuse had been going on unreported for eight months. Enough was enough!

The story presented a classic challenge. At one level it was clear that the offending behaviours had to be dealt with. But on another level,

underneath the vitriol was a broken relationship, which could not be healed by the traditional disciplinary method of inflicting punishment.

At St Andrews we have been exploring this challenge for years. Like many schools we have used traditional models of discipline:

- what has happened?
- what rule was broken?
- who's to blame?
- what punishment is deserved?
- lecture, threat, warning, detention, removal from class, daily report, move seat, time out, suspension, expulsion.

Traditional models of discipline can certainly stop offending behaviour. But while they can control it, they miss the mark — especially if good behaviour is maintained only while the teacher

is looking! Imposing punishment rarely addresses effectively either the cause of the offence or the harm done. It can damage relationships and lead to resentment, revenge or rebellion. The approach assumes that pain is somehow healed by inflicting even more pain, and it can put school staff in the role of adversary with students. The inflicting of punishment does not teach the lessons or develop the skills required to heal and restore broken relationships.

When we heard about the emerging social science known as Restorative Practices, many of us at our school recognised that its philosophy and processes reflected the culture that we had been building for years but still needed to refine. Its core philosophy for relating to justice and the righting of wrongs, as well as its language and processes, are increasingly being used in the criminal justice sector (which you can read about elsewhere in this edition) and in schools. Restorative Practices approaches wrongdoing and interpersonal conflict in a way that incorporates both accountability and support for those involved. This fresh way of looking at justice makes it clear that 'fight or flight' are not the only ways to respond to conflict. There is a third way — transformation.

The key principles of Restorative Practices are:

- All crime and misconduct is a fundamental violation of people and interpersonal relationships. So, too, are 'toxic' and unresolved interpersonal conflicts.
- These violations create obligations and liabilities.
- Restorative Practices seeks to heal and put things right.

So, justice is not just about rules; it's about relationships and working with people to put things right. At the heart of Restorative Practices is a commitment to profound fairness and to building a culture of listening that brings about interpersonal connection and healing.

For us as a school community



Restorative Practices provides a place for true accountability and an opportunity for the offender to be part of the solution rather than merely part of the problem in relationships that have gone wrong. It's definitely not a soft option

Restorative Practices has become a way of responding to wrongdoing and protracted conflict that avoids reverting to the 'discipline that divides'. Restorative Practices provides a path for us as Christian educators to discipline in a way that lives out not only the law but also the gospel.

The processes of Restorative Practices create a safe space for respectful dialogue and restorative enquiry. This can involve getting all the key stakeholders into a circle with a trained facilitator. Key questions and variants seek to build understanding — and they can provide amazing insights.

The core questions are:

- What has happened?
- What were you thinking?
- Who has been affected by what has happened, and in what way?
- What needs to be done to put things right?

We have found again and again that the circles become places of peacemaking when they are facilitated sensitively and compassionately and

when all participants 'let go and have a go'. We see young people learning how to turn conflict into cooperation.

Restorative Practices provides a voice for those who have been wronged and provides a place for the discovery of personal courage. Nevertheless, Lauren went into the meeting understandably nervous about having to face Niki.

Niki was also nervous about the meeting, but as I talked with her, she saw the sense of putting things right with Lauren because 'after all, we used to be friends'. Restorative Practices provides a place for true accountability and an opportunity for the offender to be part of the solution rather than merely part of the problem in relationships that have gone wrong. It's definitely not a soft option.

Things started to go badly, however, as soon as the meeting began. Niki became unsettled. With her eyes cast down, she fidgeted nervously. We began to explore the first question: What has happened? This is an opportunity for wrongdoing to be acknowledged,

and it sets the foundation for what is to follow. But Niki turned to me and blurted out, 'This is stupid! It's not going to work!'

It looked as though our discussion was going to fail even before it had begun. But as I look back on this meeting, I realise that it was here that the 'sacredness' began, even though it didn't feel like it at the time. The power of conflict very often lies in emotions expressed in destructive ways. The power of Restorative Practices is that it makes space for this and provides a path for these emotions to be acknowledged and expressed in safe ways.

I acknowledged what Niki said. Although it sounded like defiance, in reality she was afraid of facing Lauren and the other girls. I reassured her and reminded her of her willingness to be involved prior to the meeting. We came to a mutual decision to continue.

There were many tears as Lauren and her friends shared one by one the distress and hurt they felt about what had been happening. I found the level of emotion in this meeting very moving. In fact, I had trouble holding my own tears back! Niki cried as well.

As we moved through the questions to what needed to be done to put things right, something profound happened. It was a sign that there was going to be healing in this circle.

'Niki, I'm sorry we misunderstood you. I'm sorry you were hurt by that.' It was Kimberley\*, one of Lauren's friends, making this apology. At this point in Restorative Practices meetings it is very often the wrongdoer who apologises. However, in this case it was one of those who had been hurt who made the first step towards restoration.

Niki sat with her head bowed. Only a quick glance up at Kimberley signalled that she acknowledged what had been said. But it spoke volumes.

'I'm sorry for the mean things I've said and done', Niki said, still without lifting her head.

What followed was a sacred time. Apology after apology flowed among the girls. Through it all Niki kept her head

bowed, only to give a quick glance to each girl with whom she was restoring peace. The intense tears that had flowed earlier now ushered in quiet 'sorrys' with profound depth. I will never forget sitting listening to the girls during this time. The silent pauses between each 'sorry' added to a sense of peace that settled on the group.

We moved on to a time in which the girls formed an agreement among themselves to chart a way forward. In follow-up meetings I was pleased to see that restoration had been achieved in this case. Though the friendship never returned to the depth of earlier years, Lauren and Niki are friends again, and not once has Niki shown any of the acrimonious and abusive behaviour she did during those difficult months.

One of the fathers of Restorative Practices, Howard Zehr, writes in his

of Restorative Practices resonates with the heart and soul of the gospel — God reconciling men, women and children to himself through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:18). Easter is a call to remember God's eternal conversation with us, through confronting the pain and separation of sin, through the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection. Psalm 85:10 has also been on my mind as I have been writing this article. It reminds me of a 'theology of meeting', where 'righteousness and peace kiss each other'.

As I reflect on the many restorative conversations in which I have been involved, I recall seeing righteousness and peace 'kiss', as painful injustices and a hunger for peace are shown a way to put things right. As Restorative Practices gains momentum in Lutheran schools in Australia, I hope and pray that God's ministry of reconciliation

For us as a school community Restorative Practices has become a way of responding to wrongdoing and protracted conflict that avoids reverting to the 'discipline that divides'. Restorative Practices provides a path for us as Christian educators to discipline in a way that lives out not only the law but also the gospel

book, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, 'True justice emerges from conversation ...' The story of Niki, Lauren and their friends is the story of a sacred conversation that desperately needed to happen. In schools, churches and communities everywhere we see injustice and pseudo-justice enacted because people don't have the conversations they need to.

As I write this we are approaching Easter, the time when we celebrate the greatest story of restoration ever told. I believe that the heart and soul

will be extended through many, many conversations like that sacred one with Lauren and Niki.

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\* Names and details have been changed for purposes of confidentiality.