

# the other 3 R's

It's never too early to start  
teaching restorative processes




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reflect repair reconnect

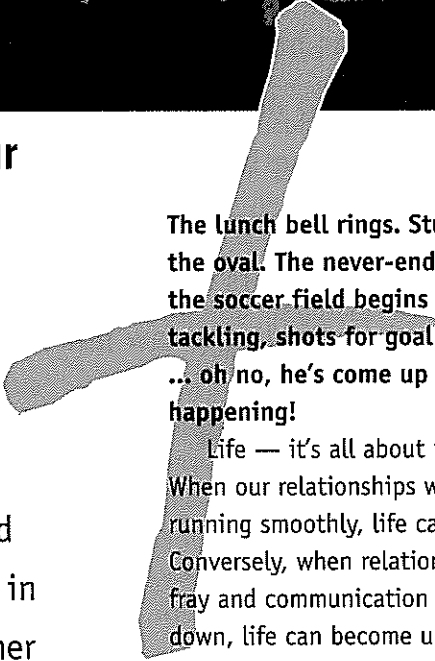
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by Jonathan Kotzur

*Brothers Jacob and Riley Slatter*



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The lunch bell rings. Students race to the oval. The never-ending battle on the soccer field begins again. Passing, tackling, shots for goal ... Wait! A trip ... oh no, he's come up swinging. It's happening!

Life — it's all about relationships. When our relationships with others are running smoothly, life can be good. Conversely, when relationships start to fray and communication begins to break down, life can become unpleasant, to say the least. How do we learn to get along with each other?

People might say that the three R's — Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmetic — are still vitally important for schooling these days. Yes, they are. Yet at St John's Lutheran Primary School in Kingaroy, Queensland, we are learning the meaning and implications of a different set of three Rs: reflecting,

repairing and reconnecting. We are using restorative processes to rebuild damaged relationships.

In order for effective teaching and learning to take place within the school community, relationships need to be right:

- students getting along with each other
- teachers and students having good rapport
- teaching colleagues working together harmoniously
- parents, students and staff conversing with mutual respect.

Sadly, a reality of life is that we have short fuses at times, become frustrated with each other and say and do things that cause harm.

Over the last few years at St John's we have made a transition from a rules-and-punishment model of

behaviour management to a relationship-facilitation model based on restorative processes.

When things go wrong, like on the soccer oval, restorative justice principles offer a process for investigating the intent, exploring the harm done, negotiating a healing process to overcome the hurt and implementing accountability for things to be done differently in the future. For our soccer players, some cool-down time to let the emotions settle might be needed, followed by a restorative chat to really deal with what's going on. This helps reconnect relationships so that life can get back on track as soon as possible — and the game can continue.

Does this process sound familiar? Remember the story from John 8, where Jesus dealt graciously instead of punitively with a woman caught out by the authorities. Or, in John 21, the way Jesus dealt with Peter, even after he had been denied by the disciple three times.

Our broken relationship with God can be restored only through the victory over sin and death Jesus won for us through his death and resurrection. Forgiveness and restoration are essential in our daily walk with God.

Implementing the restorative justice program at St John's has been an important journey. We've seen the difference that the restorative process can make in dealing with conflict situations. Hurt is real, whether you're six or sixty, and dealing with it in a healing manner is imperative for longevity of relationships and healthy coexistence in a close community.

Punishment can also hurt but it may or may not bring about a change in attitude or heart. On the other hand, when the perpetrator has to face the person he/she has hurt or harmed, there is an opportunity to learn how damaging even little thoughtless acts can be.

Sure, it costs a lot in time to work through the restorative process, but that investment definitely pays dividends in the long run, as has been verified at school many times over. From friendship

issues dealt with quickly with a focused chat, to major incidents worked through with a full restorative conference, hurting people have found an avenue of reconciliation.

One of the crucial elements in implementing the restorative process is the development and use of a shared common language. Simple, pointed questions provide the basis for dynamic dialogue.

- What were you thinking?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by this?
- What can be done to heal the harm done?
- How can things be done differently? How amazing it has been to share

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in the change process at St John's and even to see students self-initiating their own restorative chats in order to overcome hurts and problems. It has been a slow journey, with successes and failures. What matters most is that as a community we are now beginning to see relationship issues in a different light.

Our 'Four Steps to Restore' program provides a framework for dealing with relationship issues as they arise. Step 1 begins with a mini-chat, progressing, if necessary, to Step 2, a more formal reflective conversation. Step 3 involves an accountability interview, where ongoing issues are challenged and worked through. Step 4 is a formal restorative conference with all parties and stakeholders present.

Restorative processes hold people accountable for their actions, words and intent in order to heal the damage

caused. What a positive approach for our students, our leaders of tomorrow, to experience as part of their lifelong learning journey.

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As the weeks pass and Easter approaches once again, may we focus on the ultimate restoration that Jesus has brought about between God and us. We tend to know our failures and weakness all too well. Yet, despite our sinfulness, Jesus was willing to

give up everything on our behalf to once and for all set things right with God. He offers us a new start, a chance to live life differently, not in our own strength but in the power of the Spirit of the living God.

In the rapid pace of our lives, how often do we stop and think about the importance of our relationships with God and with each other? Emails, blogs and text messages might fill our screens, highlighting our need for instant communication. Yet at the heart of all this lies the desire for relationship and the sense of harmonious belonging. God offers us his grace and restoration. Surely this motivates us to sort out our differences in like fashion.

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