

Empathy Development in Youth Through Restorative Practices

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We live in fear of our children. Any society that fears its children will not long thrive. We have allowed enormous distance to develop between ourselves and the children of others. We have not come to know them sufficiently and we have not invested emotionally, materially and spiritually in their well being. We have not taught them by example to understand the interconnectedness of all things and the need to always understand the impact of our actions on others.

Violent juvenile crime - the image of monsters parading as children has been used to justify countless escalations in harsh measures after each new horror - only when it was a six year old who pulled the trigger did we stop our punitive response long enough to look at ourselves and ask, "How could this be?"

We have raised an entire generation without the prerequisites for developing empathy and then are outraged when they seem not to care about the impact of their behavior on others. We did not consciously decide to raise them without empathy, but that is the result of significant changes in our social behavior.

The development of empathy requires:

1. regular feedback about how our actions are affecting others, respectfully communicated
2. relationships in which we are valued and our worth is validated
3. experience of sympathy from others when we are in pain

Too many children are growing up with none of those characteristics in their lives and very few children experience all three on a consistent basis. We have assumed that it is a parental responsibility to provide those elements of upbringing but, in fact, all of those characteristics are the responsibility of community members as well. Without community participation in meeting those needs there is no sense of community, of reciprocal responsibility to others.

View through the youth lens

"How many of you experienced having adults other than your parents tell you what to do or how to behave in your neighborhoods when you were children?" Big grins spread across faces and everyone nods, remembering the times they were held accountable, disciplined or brought into line by someone other than family. "My parents didn't have to do anything - by the time I got home I had been thoroughly chastised." or "By the time I got home my parents already knew all about the incident." For people over 25 years of age the response is consistent - they remember non-family members involved in holding them to community standards and those memories typically prompt smiles.

"How many of you do that in your neighborhoods today?" The smiles fade and a few heads nod, but most of the audience soberly acknowledge that they and their neighbors do not function that way today. There is widespread agreement that adults in the community are not participating in the rearing of other people's children in the ways they have in the past.

This change in adult behavior has two very important implications for our communities. First, this may well be the first time since humans first formed communities that parents alone were expected to socialize their children to community norms without the reinforcement of every adult in the community, twenty four hours a day, wherever the child went. Parents can't do that alone. It is an impossible job. The overwhelming nature of such an assignment contributes to the enormous stress experienced by families.

Secondly, the world experienced by kids has these characteristics: 1) "The expectations of my parents are not community norms, because other adults see me do these things and don't say anything," and 2) "The only people besides immediate family who bother with my life are people who are paid - police, teachers, youth workers, probation officers." Setting limits on behavior generally sends a message of caring as well as accountability. When adults remember those experiences of being disciplined by others, they usually also remember some sense of belonging, of being looked after by those adults. They didn't necessarily like the consequences, but recognize that it also represented some kind of commitment to their well being.

The implicit message to kids today, that the only ones who will bother with their lives are immediate family and people who are paid, is an extremely corrosive message and creates a very different world view. This is a world which does not encourage empathy or a sense of common good larger than individual interest.

Minnesota's former Lt. Governor, Joanne Benson, tells a story that reflects this world view. Lt. Governor Benson and her family were walking through a glass enclosure in Minneapolis leaving a basketball game to return to a parking ramp. They passed a group of young adolescents engaged in horseplay. Because of the large amounts of glass and the need for other people to pass through, Benson stopped and asked the youth to stop their activity. She continued on her way. Her son, however, noted that they had continued fooling around. He turned and said, "Boys, didn't you hear what she said?" The Lt. Governor looked at her watch and added, "Now, we don't want you to get hurt, and by the way, isn't it time for you to go home?" As the Benson family turned to leave, one of the boys tugged the sleeve of the Lt. Governor and asked, "Do you work here?"

At a conference with inner city youth in Washington, D.C., participants clearly stated their perception that certain behaviors were not bad because no one ever said anything to them about the behavior. Young people understand silence to be assent, but also assume that silence is indifference to both their behavior and themselves.

A youth worker shares the story of a young runaway: "A 14-year old girl, who was experiencing some abuse in her home with her parents, had run away and called our program. I picked her up from a friend's home and gave her a ride to the foster parents' home. These foster parents are volunteers who are willing to give up to two weeks of foster care for a youth experiencing problems at home. The young girl was acting and talking like a typical teenager in crisis – somewhat critical due to her fear. Then I talked to her about being respectful of the foster parents, 'because they are volunteers and don't get paid; you need to treat their home with respect.' The car became quiet and I glanced over at her. Tears were streaming down her face. When I asked her what was wrong she said, 'I thought they were getting paid to take me in. Why would they want to help me? For nothing.'"

From their life experience youth expect that the only people who will speak to them about their behavior in public or help them are people who are paid. Young people feel invisible or undesirable. Adults don't acknowledge their existence, don't criticize or praise them, don't seem to care who they are.

It is difficult to develop a sense of responsibility about the impact of your behavior on others if you get no feedback. It is difficult to care about the welfare of others if you do not perceive that anyone cares about yours. Adults need to live those values in order for young people to learn them.

Adult fear undermines empathy development

The cycle of fear and social distance is self reinforcing once it is started. Fear of young people causes adults to avoid young people. That avoidance decreases their contact and allows the fear to grow, since the fear has no reality check through actual human contact. Young people are very sensitive to acceptance or lack of it and will often reject first if they feel rejection coming. It requires adult maturity to be able to reach past the surface of insolence or indifference often donned by adolescents to cloak their insecurities or fear of being vulnerable. Adult fear of teen-agers draws adults into behaviors that reinforce the natural insecurities and sense of isolation of adolescents, undermining their capacity for empathy.

It is fundamentally destructive to the human spirit to be feared because humans need connection, acceptance and love. Instilling fear is sometimes exhilarating but it is mostly soul-destroying.

Reducing fear through restorative practices

Restorative justice provides a framework for us to re-establish a more appropriate relationship between community members and young people and to reduce the fear adults have of young people.

The processes of restorative justice, particularly face to face processes, involve the telling of personal stories in an intimate setting. Stereotypes and broad generalizations about groups of people are difficult to sustain in the face of direct contact with an individual in a respectful setting. Restorative processes assume value in every human being and thus present individuals to one another in a respectful way which draws out human dignity in everyone.

Adult perceptions of indifferent and insolent young people and adolescent perceptions of indifferent and aloof adults dissipate in the course of an honest exchange of feelings and hopes. Restorative processes allow everyone to have voice in telling their story and making decisions.

Victim - offender dialog, family group conferencing, community panels and peacemaking circles all involve face to face opportunities for sharing personal narratives which humanize all participants. These processes not only resolve

the particular incident, they also reframe the relationships of all parties because of a shared commitment to good outcomes and mutual responsibility. These restorative processes break down social distance of participants - victims, offenders, their families, community members and criminal justice system professionals. Personal narratives are a powerful way to recast the "other" as one of "us" and, in so doing, see our fates intertwined.

Storytelling is fundamental for healthy social relationships. To feel connected and respected we need to tell our own stories and have others listen. For others to feel respected and connected to us, they need to tell their stories and have us listen.

Hearing someone else's story reduces social distance and stereotypes about the other. Personal stories capture the complexity of the individual beyond the one dimensional impressions which might be created by knowing of one single aspect of a person's life. If we truly hear the story of another, it is difficult to maintain distance from that person and fear of them.

Encouraging empathy development through restorative practices

Face to face restorative processes are designed to encourage empathy. Victim-offender dialog, group conferencing, community panel and peacemaking circle processes:

1. Provide feedback about the impact of the offender's actions on others.

A primary goal of those processes is to increase offender understanding of the impact of the behavior on all those who were affected - the victim, victim supporters, the offender's own family and friends and other community members. Restorative processes involve clear, detailed descriptions of the impact of the crime on all who are present. The harm of the behavior is communicated directly, but respectfully, to the juvenile offender. Concern is expressed by participants for the pain experienced by the victim and for the pain of the offender's family because of the offender's behavior. The group models appropriate empathy for those hurt and encourages the same in the offender.

2. Reinforce a sense of value and intrinsic worth of the offender.

Restorative processes combine support and accountability. Empathy is unlikely to develop even when you become aware of the impact of your behavior if you never experience caring. Restorative processes should also communicate caring about the offender and a belief in the intrinsic worth of the offender. Restorative processes include supporters of the offender, encourage positive relationships with other community members, and treat the offender with respect and dignity. These processes value the story of the offender. Having others listen to your story is a function of power in our culture. The more power you have, the more people will listen respectfully to your story. Consequently, listening to someone's story is a way of empowering them, of validating their worth as a human being.

3. Acknowledge pain in the offender's life without excusing the behavior.

By allowing the offender to tell his own story restorative processes create space for understanding of the offender's struggles as well. Help offered to address these problems communicates concern for the pain in the offender's life.

These face to face processes create spaces in which harm can be clearly identified and acknowledged without diminishing the offender's value or integrity of self. Those spaces allow offenders to feel empathy because their energy is not all tied up protecting the self.

Even when face to face processes are not feasible, young offenders can be involved in restorative community service which encourages empathy development. Restorative community service involves the offender in work which is valued by the community. To be most effective restorative community service engages the offender in working side by side with other community members for the benefit of the community and provides positive feedback to the offender about the value of the work to the community. Community service that, in the words of Dennis Maloney, "eases the suffering of others" promotes an awareness of pain experienced by others and provides a concrete opportunity to do something positive about that pain. Participation in improving the lives of others promotes a positive self image and a sense of personal value if that contribution is validated by others. Restorative community service offers the possibility for an offender to get back into the cycle of empathetic reciprocity that is a fundamental aspect of healthy community. In that cycle of reciprocity the offender can expect support and caring about his/her own needs and difficulties.

Community responsibility in a restorative framework

Restorative justice calls for a collaborative response to harmful behavior between the community and the

government. The community is responsible for:

1. supporting those harmed
2. communicating the impact of the behavior on the community
3. providing opportunities for those who cause harm to repair the harm to the victim and the community
4. establishing and communicating behavioral expectations for every community member in a respectful way
5. addressing underlying causes of harmful behavior.

These community responsibilities are a foundation for empathy development for all community members. Supporting those harmed requires sharing the pain – a key element of empathy. Communicating how the behavior hurts others provides a basis for those who caused harm to understand why they should be sorry for the behavior. Providing opportunities to repair the harm creates a way for feelings of regret to become concrete actions which display empathy and therefore strengthen its meaning. Establishing and communicating expectations in a respectful way requires the community to engage in extensive dialog about the perspectives, needs and experiences of all community members – which contributes to an empathetic environment. Addressing the underlying causes of harmful behavior brings community attention to associated pains that may be contributing factors in the lives of the offender and calls for empathy for those harms.

Every community member bears responsibility for carrying out these community functions. Every community member is accountable for the aggregate behavior of our youth. Every community member has opportunities to take small actions that can reverse the cycle of fear of youth and the resulting isolation and disconnection that youth experience. Youth are responding to the world they have experienced – they did not initiate that world. Our children are a mirror – a reflection of us.

Restorative justice interventions with youth provide an opportunity to begin changing the relationship between youth and adults in the community, to teach them that caring and accountability go hand in hand and to demonstrate that personal power can be used in constructive ways. Restorative justice is fundamentally about striving for healthy, loving relationships. Healthy, loving relationships do not excuse harmful behavior, but attempt to use those experiences as learning opportunities for all those involved. Restorative justice provides a pathway for transforming fear into love.

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