

BEHAVIOR · GRADES 1–6

Restorative Conversation

A 6-question script

What restorative practice is

Restorative practice (Howard Zehr, originally; widely developed in schools by Belinda Hopkins, Nancy Riestenberg and others) is an approach to conflict that focuses on: • HARM done — to whom, in what way • ACCOUNTABILITY — taking responsibility, not just punishment • REPAIR — what would actually help fix things It is NOT 'soft.' Done well, it can be harder than punishment, because it requires the child to face the impact of their behavior on others rather than just lose break time. Schools that use restorative practice well typically see reductions in repeated incidents and improved relationships. Schools that 'do' restorative practice as a script without buy-in often don't see those gains.

When to use this

USE the restorative conversation when: • Two or more children have had a conflict • A child has behaved in a way that affected others • You want the child to genuinely understand impact, not just receive a consequence • Both parties are calm enough to talk (NOT in the middle of meltdown — wait) DON'T USE this when: • The child is too young (under about 6) — adapt with simpler language • Either party is still emotionally flooded — wait until calm • There's an imminent safety issue — handle that first • It's bullying with a power imbalance — that's a different protocol

The 6 questions (in order)

1. What happened?

Open. Listen. Don't lead. Each person tells their version. Don't interrupt with corrections.

2. What were you thinking at the time?

What was going through your mind? This isn't an excuse — it's information about why.



<p>3. What have you thought about it since?</p> <p>Has your thinking changed? Sometimes children realise things between the event and the conversation. Surface it.</p>	<p>4. Who has been affected? In what way?</p> <p>The harm question. Make it specific. Not 'people are upset' but 'who specifically? What did they feel?'</p>
<p>5. What needs to happen now?</p> <p>What would actually repair this? Apology? Replacing something? Time apart? Let the child propose.</p>	<p>6. How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?</p> <p>Future-focused. What would help YOU not do this again? Not as a threat — as a plan.</p>

What to do, what to avoid

Do	Don't
Sit at the same level (not towering)	Stand over them
Use a quiet, neutral voice	Use an angry voice
Listen at least as much as you speak	Lecture
Let silences sit	Fill silences with prompts
Acknowledge feelings without judging them	'You shouldn't feel that way'
Take time — 10-15 minutes is normal	Rush through in 90 seconds
Let the child propose repair	Tell them what they'll do
End with reconnection	End with another reprimand

Common pitfalls

1. THE EMPTY APOLOGY. 'Say sorry' is not restorative. The apology has to be genuine, specific ('I'm sorry I pushed you, I should have walked away'), and accepted by the other party.
2. THE FAKE CONVERSATION. If you've already decided the consequence and are just running the script to look restorative, children know. Mean it or skip it.
3. POWER IMBALANCES. Restorative conversations work between equals. If one child has been bullying another, the bully gets the script — but you don't put the victim through 'how have you been affected' as a co-equal.
4. SKIPPING REPAIR. The whole point is what happens after the conversation. If nothing changes, the conversation was theatre.
5. NO FOLLOW-UP. Check in the next day. 'How are things?' If they say 'fine' but you can see they're not, dig gently.

Adapting for younger children



For children in K-Y2, simplify: 1. What happened? 2. How did [other child] feel? 3. How can you help fix it? 4. What will you do next time? Use a feelings poster to help name emotions. Drawings or puppets can help. Don't expect the deep reflection that older children can manage. The point is the GROOVE of restoration, not perfect reflection.

