

# Family Group Conferencing

**While typical disciplinary procedures can often make matters worse, an approach in which student offenders face their victims and others affected by their misbehavior can lead to real healing.**

An intense caustic odor permeated the school. Hundreds of students had to be evacuated from their classrooms, and many individuals suffered allergic reactions and respiratory problems. What was the cause? A few students had sprayed pepper mace on classroom doorknobs.

Students, teachers, and administrators were furious



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and felt victimized by this hurtful behavior. After identifying the responsible students, who acknowledged their involvement, we suspended them, contacted the police, and decided to try our district's new alternative option: a Family Group Conference.

In the Central Bucks Schools, a rapidly growing suburban district near Philadelphia, we are increasingly using this approach to address incidents of misconduct and violence. The Community Service Foundation, which provided our training, imported the conferencing process from Australia to use in its own alternative schools and group homes serving four Pennsylvania counties. The foundation now provides training throughout North America under the name *REAL JUSTICE* (McDonald et al. 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Family group conferences provide a forum for those most affected by an incident to sit down together and honestly address the incident and related concerns. They are helping us create a safer, more supportive environment where teachers can teach and students can learn.

## Good Shame and Bad Shame

In *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration* (1989), Australian criminologist John Braithwaite talks about the importance of shame in social control. Shame helps us develop a sense of right and wrong. Braithwaite distinguishes between two types of shaming: *stigmatizing* shame, which rejects and permanently labels offenders, and *reintegrative* shame, which rejects the deed but not the doer.

Family group conferences use reintegrative shaming. By allowing offenders to move beyond their inappropriate behavior, discard the offender label, and return to their community, conferences foster positive personal change. Reintegrative shaming is what occurs in healthy families. When children do something wrong, their parents reprimand them, but ultimately forgive them and bring them back into the family. Societies in which reintegrative shaming has a strong cultural dimension have lower crime rates.

Stigmatizing shame, on the other hand, tends to encourage the development of negative subcultures. For example, excessive use of punishment often results in further labeling and alienation of offenders. Sometimes those punished will band together to seek status and approval, and their behavior may become more



Warwick Elementary School 6th graders role-play a family group conference.

and more offensive. The small group makes them feel accepted for what they do, even though it is hurtful to others around them.

Nathanson, in *Shame and Pride* (1992), points out that the "compass of shame" has shifted since World War II. Whereas people used to "attack themselves" and show deference when experiencing shame, they now typically "attack others." For example, parents frequently criticize school administrators when they are confronted with their child's inappropriate behavior. Conferencing, however, provides a setting that can overcome these inappropriate responses.

### A Scripted Process

In order to hold a family group conference, the offender must first acknowledge committing the inappropriate behavior and be willing to participate in the process. Members of the conference include the victim and the victim's support group (family and friends), the offender and the offender's support group, and any school staff or others who have been affected by the behavior. Then, under the direction of a trained family group conference coordinator, the group moves through a scripted process, which includes two phases.

1. First, the group explores the depth and variety of ways people have been hurt by the specific victimizing

acknowledged. The process allows the victims the chance to be heard and to begin to move beyond the harm done by the incident.

The goal for the offender during this phase is to begin to take ownership for the victimizing behavior, as well as to gain a greater understanding of the variety of ways people have been harmed by it. In short, the young offender gains empathy.

2. During the second phase, the coordinator seeks to engage everyone in finding specific ways to heal the harm.

In discussing concerns, the group seeks to reach specific agreements, which the coordinator writes down. This process empowers everyone to be a part of the resolution. The list of agreements might include an acknowledgment of responsibility for the incident, an expression of apology or regret for any harm that was done, an assurance that the victimizing behavior will never occur again, financial reparation for destroyed property, community service work, the support of everyone to help rebuild the sense of trust and community, an effort to improve relationships, and a review of progress at a future date.

The extent of the agreements reached depends on the concerns and creativity of the group. At the end of this phase, all the participants sign a written agreement, everyone receives a copy, and the coordinator brings the conference to a close.

behavior. In this phase, the coordinator encourages all present to express their experiences, reactions to the incident, and feelings and concerns in a nonblaming way.

It soon becomes apparent that victimizing behavior has a negative ripple effect. Often these negative results are unintended, but the harm caused to others is real and must be

Afterward, the participants remain to "break bread" with some light refreshments. In this relaxed setting, people can continue to express their feelings. In fact, this time can be one of healing and reintegration.

### A Powerful Experience

Unlike our usual disciplinary strategies, the family group conference provides the offending student with an opportunity to move past shame and begin to make amends. There is nothing magical about a family group conference, but it has the potential to be a powerful learning experience.

An effective family group conference brings into focus for the offender the disappointment of family, friends, victims, and school staff, and causes more serious thinking about the consequences of inappropriate behavior. While shame and disapproval are part of the process, the family group conference provides the opportunity for integration back into the family or school community. The agreements reached clarify specific ways to right the wrong or heal the harm and to reduce feelings of alienation and hurt. The goal is to enhance feelings of connectedness, care, and social consciousness to reduce the possibility of future victimizing behavior.

Here are some of the lessons learned through family group conferencing.

1. Honestly acknowledging issues, feelings, and responsibility is a much more effective approach to solving problems than blame, denial, minimization, or retribution.

2. There is power in a sincere apology.

3. Building up the sense of caring and community can be much more gratifying than tearing it down.

4. Thinking through the consequences of one's actions is much better than impulsive action.

5. Inviting everyone who was affected by the victimizing incident to be part of the process of healing the harm can empower everyone involved.

6. Providing people with the opportunity to express their feelings and

FIGURE 1

**Current Disciplinary Procedure vs. REAL JUSTICE Family Group Conferencing**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Offense defined as violation against school rules</li> <li>■ Focus on establishing blame, on guilt, on the past</li> <li>■ Victim ignored</li> <li>■ Offending student passive</li> <li>■ Accountability defined as punishment</li> <li>■ Response focused on offender's past behavior</li> <li>■ Stigma of offense unremovable</li> <li>■ Nominal encouragement for repentance and forgiveness</li> <li>■ Dependence upon school professionals</li> <li>■ Strictly a rational process</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Offense defined as harm to a person or the school community</li> <li>■ Focus on problem solving, on repairing the harm</li> <li>■ Victim's rights and needs recognized</li> <li>■ Offending student encouraged to take responsibility</li> <li>■ Accountability defined as demonstrating empathy and helping repair the harm</li> <li>■ Response focused on harmful consequences of offender's behavior</li> <li>■ Stigma of offense removable through appropriate actions</li> <li>■ Repentance actively encouraged and forgiveness possible</li> <li>■ Direct involvement by those affected</li> <li>■ Allows for expression of emotion</li> </ul> |
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—Adapted with permission from H. Zehr, (1990), *Changing Lenses*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press).

concerns and to collaborate in righting the wrong empowers everyone to move on in a healthy way and begin to put the incident to rest.

**Healing and Closure**

In the pepper mace incident, unlike the typical disciplinary procedure, the offenders actually had to face some of the people they had hurt (including their parents) and experience their emotions. They also had an opportunity to make amends and take actions that would move them beyond their shame and back into the school community. Conferencing allows

offenders to begin to shed their stigmatizing "offender" label, and they are often amazed at the generosity of others once they show remorse.

In another elementary school incident, two boys hurt another boy. Simple punishment in this case would have only caused resentment by the offenders toward the victim. A family group conference, however, revealed a pattern of persistent bullying by the two boys. The bullies, the victim, and their respective parents all had a chance to speak honestly and emotionally. As a result, the two boys sincerely apologized and promised to help stop

other students from persecuting the victim, the victim forgave the boys, the parents felt that the school had responded effectively, and harmony was restored among the children.

We have also begun using conferencing in the elementary schools as a violence prevention technique. Guidance counselors and classroom teachers involve the children in role plays of conferences to deal with common incidents of bullying, teasing, or violence. The children play the roles of offenders, victims, parents, and school staff. Not only are the role plays surprisingly realistic, but the subsequent discussions hit on very adult issues, such as questioning the effectiveness of punishment.

Abraham Maslow said, "If the only tool I have is a hammer, I tend to treat everything as a nail." Family group conferencing is a different tool to use when school staff are seeking to respond meaningfully to victimizing behavior. It is proactive and seeks to minimize the negative impact of hurt, anger, helplessness, labeling, stigmatization, and alienation. Conferencing is making our school community a safer, more supportive place where students can learn and grow. ■

For more information, contact REAL JUSTICE, P.O. Box 229, Bethlehem, PA 18016-0229; (610) 807-9221.

**References**

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**Bruce R. Taylor** is the Supervisor of Special Education and **Glenn Kummery** is a Social Worker in Central Bucks School District, 16 Weldon Dr., Doylestown, PA 18901-2359.