



Restorative Justice: Preschool Style

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A few years ago, I attended grad school with a [classmate](#) who researched [restorative justice](#) with university students. Her research spoke deeply to me, and I fell in love with the idea of asking young people to take intentional actions to repair harm caused by their behavior. Over the years, I've seen these ideas bubble up in my own teaching practices. This blog is about restorative justice: preschool style.

It cracks me up to use a fancy term like “restorative justice” for preschool behavior management, but I believe this concept can be introduced to really young kids. Let me give you some examples of harm that preschool kids do to one another (whether or not by accident): knocking over toys, stepping on fingers, pushing in line, hitting, kicking, weird faces, and saying mean things. Believe it or not, these incidents used to take up *huge* amounts of my teaching day.

Research indicates teachers should not force preschoolers to say “sorry” because they’re too young to understand the sentiment. Behavior experts suggest teachers should give more attention to the victim than the offender in order to minimize attention-seeking behaviors. But the bottom line is: Getting a preschool child to stop crying can take *forever!* And the offender often feels angry and resistant to discussion about what went wrong. So how does a preschool teacher manage these daily situations and develop strong classroom community?

Last year, I started a restorative justice practice in my classroom: I simply have the offender ask the victim, “Can I help you feel better?” The offender offers solutions like hugs, high fives, funny faces, or helping to fix something broken. The victim accepts the solution or offers another idea until they mutually agree. Oh how I love the way this has improved my classroom culture!

First, it saves me time. Instead of talking with each child separately, I keep both kids close while they talk it out. Most solutions come quickly and incidents are *completely over* in about 15-30 seconds! It’s magical to watch a crying child accept a hug, wipe away tears, and run off to play with the same kid who just kicked him! Second, this strategy promotes student leadership. The indirect message becomes “Kids can make things better” instead of “Kids need *adults* to make things better.” I think this is huge. Third, the kids learn how to apply these strategies in all kinds of situations to help peers feel better. I’ve seen them ask, “Can I help you feel better?” for other preschool problems like: Injuries on the playground, who is first in line, or tearful kids saying goodbye to parents. Win, win, win!

Best of all, this behavior management strategy puts classroom community first. It teaches kids to care about one another and help friends in distress. Recently, one of our girls was crying because recess was over. I could see a few students watching her with concern. One of the boys scooted over and asked, “Can I help you feel better?” The girl nodded her head, and he gave her a hug. Before I knew it, there were about five students hugging her. It was over quickly, and they were all beaming with love. And just like that, we got right back to learning with a class full of smiling, self-reliant preschool kids!