



## **Adapting Restorative Practices for Students with Disabilities**

In 2018, [Pathways to Restorative Communities](#) (P2RC) received a grant from [Communities for Restorative Justice](#) (C4RJ) to implement Restorative Practices (RP) into Dearborn Academy, a school that specializes in working with students with disabilities. This paper includes who we are, what we learned along the way, and provides some resources for using RP with students with disabilities. Authors who contributed to this document include: Rebecca Altepeter, Janice Durham, Candace Julyan, Maria Landaverde, Julie Manning, Alison Mehan, and Hannah Sycks.

### **Who We Are**

P2RC is committed to helping schools achieve their mission and goals of stronger relationships and community through the use of RP. Our goal is to work with the unique aspects of each school to strengthen their skills and confidence in utilizing RP.

[Dearborn Academy](#) is a private, non-profit day school serving students from grades 3-12. Students come to Dearborn to overcome challenges resulting from learning difficulties, including language-based and executive functioning and/or anxiety, depression or other complex mental health disorders. The goal of this school is to help students develop the knowledge, skills and tools needed to gain academic mastery and build meaningful friendships. The implementation of RP with Community Building Circles, Restorative Chats, and Restorative Conferences offered Dearborn staff and students an ideal vehicle for strengthening relationships and building community.

### **What we Learned Along the Way**

We learned that using Community Building Circles with students with disabilities is appropriate and valuable for building relationships and trust with students which is a significant requirement when working with students with disabilities. Taking the time to adapt these practices proved to be effective in improving both students' academic and social and emotional skills.

Adaptations required attention to several categories of work in the creation and implementation of Community Building Circles: 1) preparation and planning, 2) facilitation and support, and 3) reflection and follow up.

#### **Preparation & Planning**

- Conceptual planning
  - The goal of the circle and how it will contribute to the community and well being of students needs to be clear.

- Consider how students can help plan the questions or run the circle.
- Think about the length of time that will hold students' attention.
- Be attentive to how the norms match the group's needs.
- Take into account students' backgrounds, strengths, and needs.
- Consider how to prepare students who are at different stages of circle engagement.
- Prepare a back up plan for students who are not ready to engage in the circle.
- Learning support
  - Consider the skills needed to participate in the circle
  - Assume some students will need additional support. Here are some suggestions:
    - Consider the variety of ways to participate
    - Preview the circle beforehand
    - Have students write their answers beforehand
    - Role-play the circle ahead of time
  - Create visuals, sentence starters, and/or sample answers
- Social emotional support
  - What dynamics among circle members should be considered
  - Determine which student will do well in the "hot seat"
  - Consider assigning seats for certain students to be next to a supportive person
  - Consider how the topic/questions impact each student

### Facilitation & Support

- At the Beginning of the circle
  - Preview with students the norms
  - Remind students the ways they can participate (including by passing)
  - Review circle structure
- In the Middle of the circle
  - Circle back to students who have passed in case they just needed additional think time
  - Monitor students for signs of stress or lack of engagement and use whole-group techniques or individual interventions as needed (e.g., "Let's all pause and take three deep breaths while feeling our feet on the floor" or asking a clinician or other support person to offer a student an individual check-in or skills coaching within or outside of the the circle)

### Reflection & Follow up questions by teachers and counselors

- Were connections made during the circle?
- Are there any responses that should be revisited with students?

## Challenges and Adaptations for Using Restorative Practices with Students with Disabilities

Ensuring that the Community Building Circle will strengthen relationships requires paying attention to a variety of factors related to each student's history, diagnosis, interest, and personality. A main focus at Dearborn Academy is to build relationships and a first step in that process is to develop a connection with a single student or a group of students.

Circle Planning begins with a series of questions.

- What is the purpose of the circle in general and how will it contribute to the community and the well being of students?
- How will we use the students' background and "learning goals" in the circle design?
- What is the worst possible answer that someone can say?
- How might peer's respond (both positively and negatively)?

*Another aspect of the Circle planning involves considering the various social/emotional challenges that students might encounter while participating in the circle.*

<b>Possible Challenge</b>	<b>Ways to address that challenge</b>
Difficulty taking risk to be in the "hot seat," meaning the first to speak in the circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Preview question ahead of circle</li><li>● Give examples of answers</li><li>● Provide sentence starters</li><li>● If necessary, change order so student is not in hot seat</li><li>● Remind students they can pass, but come back to them so they build skills to participate</li></ul>
May freeze up when it is their turn to share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Preview questions ahead of circle and offer them the opportunity to write down their answer/notes to refer to</li><li>● Ask the student if they have a preference for where they go in the order (perhaps they want to go last, first, after a friend, etc.)</li><li>● Encourage them to find/provide seating next to a preferred person</li><li>● Preview who to look at when talking</li></ul>

<p>May go many circles without participating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Engage students in question making process -- ask them topics they are interested in</li> <li>● Continue to offer student time to share in the circle -- giving space to build skills</li> <li>● Pull the student (during a time outside the circle) with a staff or peer to reflect on how being in the circle and saying nothing is just as important</li> <li>● Use a preferred peer outside of circle time to “hook” the student</li> </ul>
<p>May get stuck if they feel like other students have already “shared all their ideas”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Encourage them to share one of the ideas that a classmate has already shared that they agreed with</li> </ul>
<p>May answer questions with silly/off topic answers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide specific praise for their participation</li> <li>● Engage students in question making process -- ask them topics they are interested in</li> <li>● If the whole group is responding like this, offer/ask students to write things down instead</li> </ul>
<p>May get up and leave during the circle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Include a movement break during the circle and ask student for help in designing the movement</li> </ul>
<p>May focus on their cell phone during the circle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Consider create a centerpiece of everyone’s cell phone at the center of the circle</li> </ul>

## Further Resources for Using Restorative Practices with Students with Disabilities

You can see Dearborn's video presentation ["Circle About Circles"](#)

You can access Dearborn's slides for a lesson on bullying here:

[Dearborn Bullying circle slide show](#)

Here is an example of a middle school circle for students with disabilities at Dearborn:

[Dearborn Middle School circle with accommodations](#)

["Restorative Practices and Special Needs"](#) is a resource that was used and found helpful while working on this project.