

## **Theoretical Perspective**

**(Extract from the N E Lincs Practice Leads resource Book)**

The training programme of The Restorative Foundation is informed by theory initially described by Watzlawick et al (1967) and more recently developed and presented by Barnett Pearce (1989; 2007) as ‘A Communication Perspective’. This perspective is consistent with theoretical underpinnings in Systemic Theory (our social interconnection) and Social Constructionism (our participation in meaning-making). The programme is also influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), particularly as reflected in the work of Lois Holzman and Fred Newman (2009).

Communication is usually considered to be a process for transmitting information and for influencing people. This may be described as a ‘transmission’ model in which an idea is wrapped in words and sent off to another person, who unwraps the words and discovers the idea. This model is useful, but limited - as may be appreciated by the varying responses to a text saying, ‘late home tonight’! In all communication, it is the context that determines meaning and each person involved in a communication will contribute to the context of the communication. Understanding is continually being created and recreated: both from the context of the sender, and from the context of the receiver.

From a communication perspective ALL behavior is communication – and ALL communication affects behavior. Communication is the medium in which we live. From this perspective, it is not possible NOT to communicate. What we know always comes in one way or another from experience, and our experience is inextricably social. Our worlds are made in communication.

### **There are always two sides to the communication process.**

One side involves giving meaning to our experience. It is a feature of the human condition that we all continually make meaning and act on the basis of the store of meanings we have made. The other side involves our interactions in a social world where other people are simultaneously acting on the basis of their store of meanings. No one has direct access to the meanings made by others. From this perspective, it

is not surprising that difficulties occur in the communication process that takes place between and among people.

For individuals involved in conflict or wrongdoing, restorative dialogue will provide an opportunity to consider the meanings individuals have made as well as hear about the meanings made by other people.

**There is always a relationship between an individual and their words or actions.**

At times, individuals are treated as though they and their words or actions are the same thing. For example, ‘bullying behaviour’ may be assumed to mean the person is ‘a bully’. Typically, the language chosen will imply the person ‘is’ or ‘has’ certain characteristics that are an intrinsic part of their being. Restorative Principles inform practice in which all individuals are treated with unconditional respect, even though their actions may be judged as unacceptable.

To believe that you are ‘bad’ because there is something wrong with you can render you helpless. To believe that what you did is bad, and you are able to behave differently, is quite a different space to be in. The challenge is to find ways of speaking differently. In all restorative communication, it will be helpful to speak from a position of appreciating that although words and actions may be a problem, the person is not the problem.

**Restorative Principles** are derived from the practice of **Restorative Justice** as described by writers such as Howard Zehr (2002), Elizabeth Elliott (2011) and Terry O’Connell et al (1999). Restorative Principles involve ideas such as:

- Using language that is respectful
- Promoting social learning and social understanding
- Maintaining a distinction between the deed and the doer
- Aiming to give voice to those affected by the hurtful or harmful actions of others
- Preparing people carefully for any arranged meeting
- Helping individuals to understand and take responsibility for the adverse effects of their words and actions on others
- When hurt or harm has occurred, aiming to restoring dignity and respectful relationships

Findings from the related perspective of **Procedural Justice** indicate that people are more concerned with whether they receive fair outcomes, arrived at through a fair procedure, than with the favourability of the outcomes. In describing the principles of Procedural Justice, Tyler (2006) asserts that people's motivation to co-operate with others is rooted in social relationships and ethical judgments and does not primarily flow from the desire to avoid punishments or gain rewards.

These ideas may be summarised as representing:

## **Principles for Relationships**

*- A framework that can help to guide how we treat each other.*

The practice of restorative principles will influence the development of a respectful and collaborative relationship context within which individuals may learn and develop as responsible and engaged participants. From a communication perspective, key questions relevant to restorative practice are:

### **What kind of social world do we want to make?**

An environment in which the practice of restorative principles:

- Develops respect for others
- Develops the self-respect of individuals
- Promotes listening and understanding
- Generates awareness and sensitivity for all social and cultural differences
- Values individuals and opposes hurtful and harmful behaviours
- Builds opportunities for collaborative and restorative conversation
- Provides a fair process in decision-making

### **How should we communicate in order to achieve the social world we seek?**

The practice of restorative principles will involve:

- An emphasis on how we are communicating and on what we are making
- A concern to demonstrate Fair Process in all decision-making
- An affirmation of the inherent worth of each individual

- A priority to restore relationships rather than judge individuals
- A commitment to include wider relationships involving families and communities

### **What are we making when we communicate?**

The practice of restorative principles will create social worlds in which:

- Individuals are active in performing the values they wish to promote
- The process of building respectful relationships develops the ability of individuals to interact respectfully
- Individuals experience a sense of connection and inclusion
- Healthy relationships are at the heart of well-being, achievement and success
- The environment supports creativity, diversity and personal development

### **Sources:**

- Elliott, E. (2011) Security with Care: Restorative Justice and Healthy Societies.  
Fernwood Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Holzman, L. (2009) Vygotsky at Work and Play. Routledge
- O'Connell, T. et al (1999) Conference Handbook. The Piper Press, Pennsylvania
- Pearce, W. Barnett. (2007) Making Social Worlds Blackwell Publishing
- Pearce, W. Barnett. (1989) Communication and the Human Condition.  
Southern Illinois University Press
- Tyler, T.R. (2006) Why People Obey the Law Princeton University Press
- Vygotsky,L.S. (1978) Mind in Society. Harvard University Press
- Watzlawick, P. et al. (1967) Pragmatics of Human Communication. W.W. Norton.
- Zehr, H. (2002) The Little Book of Restorative Justice. Good Books, Intercourse, PA