

SAMPLE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRECONFERENCE QUESTIONS AND DIALOG

The purpose of a pre-conference for student discipline issues is to help offending students to take responsibility for their actions and prepare them to meet face to face in a safe, respectful circle dialog with those they may have harmed who also deserve and will benefit from having a voice. Each party is met with separately so they can tell their own side of the story, gain rapport and a feeling of trust with the facilitator, and understand what the process will look like.

WELCOME/TRUST BUILDING

- Hi [name of person], thanks for being here with us.
- How are you doing today?
- Do you know why we're here?
- Facilitator: My name is ___ and I'm here to help the school with their restorative justice meetings.
- We want to get to know you a little better and talk about what's going on, and we want to tell you a little about what restorative justice is and how we're using it here at your school.
- Would you like to tell us a bit about yourself or would you like me to start by telling you about restorative justice?
 - Restorative justice is a meeting that brings people together who might be having a disagreement or some sort of conflict with each other. But sometimes it's a matter of not being able to get to school on time or having difficulty passing subjects. The school wants everyone to be safe and successful, so our job is to come in and bring the right people together to talk about whatever is going on so we can help.
 - It's not a lecture and it's not like court where there's a judge and a jury and lawyers. It's a respectful conversation where we all sit in a circle.
 - It's voluntary. You can choose to do it or not. Its purpose is to help all the students involved.
 - It's also confidential. It's important that everyone who comes to the circle honors everyone's privacy and keeps what's said in the room confidential [exception: evidence of harm to self or others] We'll have everyone sign a confidentiality agreement.
 - We're not there to tell you what to do. It's a chance for you to say whatever you need to say to the other person (or people). We will be there with you and lead the discussion and keep everyone safe and respectful. We will ask some questions such as what happened and who has been affected, and everyone will have a chance to answer.
 - We first talk with each person separately, which is we're doing with you now, to be sure each one has a chance to tell their side of the story. This also helps us to decide whether we can bring people together or not.
 - It's easy to get hurt when people say or do something that's intended to hurt us; but sometimes there's just a misunderstanding between people, and we just need a safe, respectful place to talk it out.
 - We as facilitators don't take sides. We listen to each person to be sure they can meet with the other person safely and respectfully.
 - You are welcome to bring someone to support you to the restorative justice meeting. It could be a friend, or a favorite teacher, or a coach, or perhaps your parent. We will be there along with someone from the school.
 - How does that sound? Do you have any questions?

BUILD RAPPORT

Avoid judgment; just let the student speak. This is a golden opportunity to ask questions with no agenda other than to understand and get to know the student. It is a mistake to sprint through the pre-conference because of a time crunch or because there are a large number of discipline cases to get to. There is rich opportunity here to build the relationship first and you show the student that you care, that you are giving him/her/them a voice, that you are genuinely interested in what the student has to say. Without that you may achieve *obedience*, but that is a far cry from mutual respect, trust, and willing cooperation. Here are some sample questions to select from.

- So, tell us about yourself.
- What's something you do well? Are you in any sport? Are you pretty good at that?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- What strengths do you have, what do you like/admire about yourself, what would your friends say about you?
- Do you like this school? What do you like (or dislike) about it?
- Do you have a best friend at school or a favorite teacher?
- What's your favorite subject?
- Do you have brothers or sisters?
- How are things going at home? [If the student mentions problems at home, offer empathy. Do not offer solutions. Stay in the question.] Do you need help with that? Who have you asked for help? What kind of help have you gotten? [Schools should have a list of resources if for example family or mental health counseling or resources such as food or clothing seem to be a need.]
- [If the student mentions the possibility of harm to self or others such as possible suicide, this requires mandatory reporting procedures. Always remain calm, empathetic, and helpful in these situations. Make sure the school follows through on providing appropriate resources or contacting authorities.]

DISCUSS THE INCIDENT

- So, we heard about some ____ (i.e., name calling, gossip, social media or texting, fighting, problems getting to school on time, talking in class, not getting homework done, intimidation or bullying, etc.).
- Can you tell us about that? What happened?
- I want to be sure I understand. Can you tell me who was there with you...where and when did it take place...what did he/she say exactly? [Get the details for clarity.]
- Thanks for sharing all that. It takes a lot of courage to talk about these sorts of things to complete strangers. We really appreciate you being honest.
- How did you feel when it happened, and how do you feel about it now? [Use the "I feel I need words" list if needed.]
- [Keep asking clarification questions and offer no solutions. Let the student get their story out fully. Offer empathy. Be respectful and encouraging.]
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about? When did this all start and what's happening now?
- Lots of times it's easier to see what others have done wrong, but much harder to see how we play a role. We would never ask you to take responsibility for what someone else did, but can you tell us if there is something you can take responsibility for?
- What do you think you might have done differently if you had it to do over again?
- Is there something you did that you're especially proud of that made things better? (...or not so proud of?)

COMPLETE THE DISCUSSION

- What do you think would be the best possible outcome to this?
- What do you think you need? [Use "I feel I need" word lists.]
- How do you feel about sitting in a circle like this and talking to ____ and saying what you've told me?
- Would you be okay with that?
- Who would you like to bring for support?
- Then, as long as you feel comfortable, we'll go ahead and get that set up after we meet with [the other person] first to make sure it's okay with them too..
- Thanks again for being so honest with us. We'll see you [in a couple days, later today, or whenever the RJ conference is to be set up].