

**Community Conferencing:
Responding to the Challenge of Drug Related
Incidents in Schools and Community Settings**

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Abstract

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This paper will examine a range of issues surrounding the official responses by schools and other communities to incidents involving drugs and youth. Such issues include the damage to the emotional and social bonds within schools, families and their respective communities and the trauma that occurs in the wake of these incidents. Official sanctions to such incidents which often produce highly emotional reactions are sometimes less than helpful and create more damage and trauma. Neither do they produce the learnings for those affected (including the "offender") for which they are supposedly conceived. What also needs to be addressed in our responses is the harm to those young people and to their relationships with the significant people in their lives.

Community Conferencing, now used across schools and the justice system in Australasia, North America and the United Kingdom, offers a restorative approach in these often trying circumstances for those people drawn into the mess these incidents cause. This paper will explore this restorative philosophy and practice aimed at rebuilding and strengthening social and emotional bonds. It will offer some powerful insights into the beliefs which drive our official sanctions. Such an approach can be adapted to other interventions in a flexible way by the system and individuals in it to produce just and at the same time, healing outcomes for those most affected, without being punitive.

Community Conferencing: Responding to the Challenge of Drug Related Incidents in Schools and Community Settings

1. Introduction

This paper will explore the benefits of Community Conferencing for school communities as an additional tool to current behaviour practices as they apply to the management of drug related incidents. Most school behaviour management plans have a mandatory suspension or even exclusion as a sanction in response to this kind of incident. Most schools also have protocols for reintegrating students back into the school after a suspension, or integrating students enrolling from other schools after an exclusion.

There is no dispute from this author about the value and necessity of effective drug education in schools and similar programs in moral, health and social development. Such programs are the basis of sound preventative measures by schools as they assist students to cope with health and social issues. Despite the best efforts of schools in this regard, there will be situations arising which require a comprehensive response to the complex issues which surface when students are found in possession of or using alcohol and/or illicit substances. People who work in school settings will be well acquainted with the scenario of dealing with drug incidents - having to involve the police; dealing with parents who are highly anxious; staff who are polarised about the issue; other students whose activities have been interrupted one way or another; and sometimes the unwelcome attention of the media.

2. History of Community Conferencing in Australian Schools

Community Conferencing is not new to Australia. Introduced from New Zealand in 1992, the first (police) experiment was based in the New South Wales town of Wagga Wagga where conferences were facilitated by police to divert youth entering the justice system away from court (Moore 1995) (The Wagga model, as it now known, became the basis for an international conferencing movement in Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA.). In 1994, I was working as a guidance officer in the Queensland education department and sought help from the Wagga police to run the first school based conference in Australia. Eventually funding was made available to conduct a twelve month trial of the process as an additional tool for managing behaviour in a supportive school environment. Completed in 1996, the trial was an outstanding success and resulted in the uptake of conferencing across the state. Schools in New South Wales, Tasmania and South Australia have now embraced conferencing as one of a number of processes in their continuum of behaviour management strategies.

Summary of outcomes of formal experiments in Queensland schools:

Findings from the first Queensland Education Department trial (Department of Education, 1996) included:

- * participants were highly satisfied with the process and its outcomes
- * high compliance rate with the terms of the agreement by offenders
- * low rates of reoffending
- * a majority of offenders felt they were more accepted, cared about and more closely connected to other conference participants following conferencing
- * a majority of victims felt safer and more able to manage similar situations than before conferencing
- * the majority of conference participants had closer relationships with other conference participants after conferencing
- * all school administrators felt that conferencing reinforced school values
- * most family members expressed positive perceptions of the school and comfort in approaching the school on other matters
- * nearly all schools in the trial reported they had changed their thinking about managing behaviour from a punitive to a more restorative approach

A further pilot by the Queensland Education Department in 1997 (Education Queensland, 1998, forthcoming) has confirmed that conferencing is a highly effective strategy for dealing with incidents of serious harm in schools. It has also served to highlight implementation issues which will be discussed later in this paper.

In the course of both experiments, a total of 89 conferences were conducted across primary and secondary schools. The majority of conferences were in response to assaults and serious victimisation, followed by property damage and theft. Conferences were also used to address incidents involving drugs, damaging the reputation of the school, truanting, verbal abuse, persistent disruption in class, and in one case, a bomb threat.

3. Rationale

When a behaviour such as illicit substance use by an individual damages or destroys the social bonds between themselves and others, the conflict which arises will produce predictable outcomes which often produce further harm. Young people often have no notion of the extent of the impact of their behaviour on themselves on others. If our interventions are designed to recognise and acknowledge that harm, and plan how to repair it, then they are more likely to produce outcomes which focus on changing the offending behaviour, understanding the impact on others, and providing support for those most in need.

4. The Community Conference Process

The underlying principles of community conferencing derive from a range of disciplines including biology, psychology, political philosophy and social, organisational and management theory. We call these underlying principles a theory of transformative justice (Moore, 1998). This work has brought us to a deeper understanding of our emotional needs when we have been violated and hurt. In particular, the work of Tomkins (1962-92), Braithwaite (1989), Nathanson (1992, 96) and Kelly (1996) in the fields of neurobiology and psychology of emotions (Affect theory) and sociology have led us to a clearer understanding of our emotions and how fundamentally important they are to our relationships with others.

Community Conferencing is a process which brings together, in the wake of a serious incident of harm, the "offender" and his or her victim(s) along with their families, and appropriate school personnel. The purpose is to explore the harm done to all those affected, decide what needs to be done to repair that harm, and how to minimise the chance of it happening again. The conference is conducted by a trained facilitator. While illicit drug use is viewed by many as a "victimless" crime, the impact on families and the school community can be immense, not to mention the impact on the young person's health and life chances.

When we examine who is hurt when a student or adult does something inappropriate, like using illicit substances, we finally come to the realisation that the hurt is widespread. Parents are usually frantic with worry about their child's situation both from a health point of view, and the legal ramifications of a possible criminal record. They often are deeply ashamed of their situation. The school administration has the burden and frustration of dealing with a disruptive incident, and the possibility of a damaged reputation if it becomes public knowledge via media. Other students and staff may feel let down by the student, especially if the situation has interfered with sporting teams, group assessments, or school camps. The conference provides a forum for all those affected to speak openly and honestly about their issues. It allows the deeply negative feelings to be transformed into those of cooperation. Integration of the student back into the school community becomes possible in a real, emotional sense. Plans for support for the student are made during the conference. This might include appropriate drug counselling, or social and academic support - a response to the needs of the student which become clearer during the conference.

Conferences are designed to provide all those affected with a chance to tell their stories about the harm that has been done. Being able to talk about deeply negative feelings is a great relief. Having those feelings acknowledged and validated is even better. Seeing young people and their families finally understand the hurt, be genuinely remorseful and offer an apology from the heart does something fundamental for those affected - it allows them to forgive. This does not mean letting the individuals off easily. Indeed, they are often asked to do any number of things to repair the harm. The conference is very demanding on those responsible. It is more demanding than a suspension, detention or some other sanction which does not necessarily make the young people involved directly accountable to those most hurt. But it is demanding for a reason: to help repair the damage, and to minimise further harm, and to do so

by helping the perpetrators and others to a deeper understanding of how harmful their behaviour was to themselves and others.

The following cases, which occurred at large high schools, is typical of conferences used as a response to a drug related incident:

5. Case Study 1.

Background:

Early one morning before school, two Year 8 girls were discovered smoking marijuana down behind a sports shed in the school grounds by the janitor. He reported the situation to the school administration who collected the girls, took them to sick bay to establish their health status, suspended them (with a view to exclusion) and phoned their parents. It transpired that the girls had obtained the joint from a "friend" before school and had decided to smoke it before class. After an investigation by the administration, it was decided to conduct a conference to deal with the issues and help decide whether the girls would come back to this school. Details regarding the incident and the source of the drug were passed on to the Police via the Police Liaison Officer who attended the school part-time.

Conference participants:

- * Tracey, one of the girls, and her mum and dad
- * Bronwyn, the other girl, accompanied by her mother (Bronwyn's father was so angry with her he refused to participate in the conference and hung up on a call lodged by the conference facilitator in preparation for the event)
- * the Janitor who discovered the girls smoking the joint
- * the Deputy Principal who investigated the incident
- * the Year 8 Co-ordinator who had a significant role in managing the affairs and behaviour of the Year 8 students
- * the Police Liaison Officer who had been talking to class groups about a range of criminal behaviours which would impact on their lives, and had been in a supportive, preventative role in the school
- * the school Principal who would determine the fate of the girls in the school
- * the conference facilitator (the author)

Description of the Conference:

The conference opened with both girls being asked to speak of their involvement; what they had been thinking at the time; what had happened to them since; who had been affected and in what way. They spoke of their foolishness and their worry about getting caught at the time. They talked about the disappointment of their parents, and the loss of trust. They mentioned that sanctions had also been

applied at home, and the affect on their families at home. They were unable to guess at the impact of their behaviour on any others.

The Janitor spoke of what it felt like to discover the girls down behind the shed. He talked about his attachment to the school after working there for many years. He knew how he would feel if he had a daughter who had been busted for dope. He offered to support the two girls in any way.

The Deputy Principal spoke of how difficult it was for him to ring parents with bad news and how he felt their shock and embarrassment. He spoke of his feelings of responsibility to students in his care and his wish for both girls that they make the most of their lives at school. Later in the conference he discussed the health risks associated with smoking marijuana and how often he'd seen whole families destroyed because of young people's drug taking.

The Year 8 Co-ordinator was very emotional, and cried when speaking of her own guilt that somehow she had contributed to the girls' behaviour by not trying harder with the girls. She spoke of how committed she was to the welfare and education of the Year 8 population. She faced a dilemma every time new or prospective parents rang her to ask about the use of drugs in the school. She talked of girls and women needing to take risks to get on in the world, but of their need to choose the right sort of risks. She spoke of how highly both girls were regarded by other staff and students, and their leadership potential, which was now ruined by their behaviour.

The Police Liaison Officer, with a lump in her throat, said she now felt that her work in the school was seen as an absolute joke, and how embarrassing that was for her. She said how LUCKY the girls were to have been caught - an opportunity for some positive changes. She spoke of her disappointment in hearing that the only risk the girls had perceived was "getting caught". She also mentioned that the first she heard of it was at the police station, so word was already out. She offered her support for the girls at school.

The Principal echoed and empathised with the views held by staff present at the conference. She flagged issues relating to how better the school might minimise the chance of the event recurring and how these might be handled when they do occur.

Both mothers were visibly upset (one had to leave the room at one stage), and spoke of their worry, their disappointment, the conflict at home, the ruining of futures when such potential is there for success and leadership. They spoke of how hard they had tried to follow up and follow through with adolescent needs for independence, and how hard it was to achieve a balance between too hard and too soft. They were relieved to hear that their sentiments were shared by the school. Tracey's father confessed to being in trouble as a child and knowing all the tricks. He also added that as parents they tried to steer their kids through their potential mistakes.

The two girls, who had cried on and off during the conference, offered their apologies to their parents and staff and assured the group that they would never make the same mistake again and would work hard to win back trust and respect of their parents and the school.

Conference outcomes:

The following agreement was reached by all present:

- * the proceedings and outcomes of the conference were to remain confidential
- * Tracey was to come to school on a later bus so she did not have so much time at school in the mornings
- * both girls agreed to assist the Year 8 coordinator reach some conclusion about what she would tell prospective parents. They would meet with her in the next week to do this
- * both girls were encouraged to seek support from caring adults in the school when they were troubled by anything (eg Guidance Officer, Deputy Principal, Year 8 Coordinator...)
- * the Deputy Principal requested to meet the girls later so they could give him the names of other Year 8 students who were using drugs so he could refer them for help
- * both girls were to exhibit exemplary behaviour in and out of class to prove that they have changed their behaviour and could again be trusted
- * the Principal would recommend to regional office their readmission to the school

Afterwards:

In the weeks and months following the conference, both girls settled down at school and were model students. Tracey's mother later commented that it was a defining moment in her daughter's life. Bronwyn's mother said how disappointing it was that her husband had not attended the conference as he missed out on a valuable opportunity for healing some of his hurt.

Some months later, a visiting American documentary maker interviewed these two girls about the conference and its impact on them. They spoke of the feelings of shame they felt when they had realised just how many people had been affected and how much these people cared for them.

Case Study 2.

Background

Four students were caught in possession of a small quantity of marijuana, supplied by one of them. They had been taken to the local Police Station and later interviewed in the company of their parents. Each owned responsibility for having possessed and/or supplied the drug. All four had not previously been in trouble with the police and came from supportive families. They subsequently agreed to participate in a conference at the school two weeks later.

Participants

Student A, mother, father and younger sister

Student B, mother

Student C, mother's partner

Student D, mother and father

School Principal

School Deputy

Welfare Teacher

Police Youth Liaison Officer

Conference - 1 hr 15 minutes

Convenor explored with ABCD what had happened, who had been affected, what it was like going home, what was the hardest thing and how things had been at home since the incident. Each of the students found it difficult, facing trust issues in the home and general home life affected. Each experienced a sense of shame about others knowing.

School Deputy

Described how difficult it was going down to the Police Station to report the matter. Disappointed as he had put time into the students. Concerned with the reputation of the school and other students. The hardest part was phoning the parents to tell them and hearing their distress.

School Principal

Found it difficult to have to take an issue like this out of the school setting and involve the police. Concerned about the school reputation and would rather deal with the matter in-house.

Welfare Teacher

Expressed concern that students felt compelled to consider experimenting with drugs after a lesson talking to them about the harm of drugs. Loss of trust for the kids.

A's Mother

Awful to have been phoned at home and told about the incident. Didn't want to believe it was her son involved. Has been difficult at home and they are only just starting to pull together.

A's Father

Was just starting to trust their son and now wondering if they can trust again. If anything positive was to come from all this, it is probably good that it occurred now - when it could be dealt with in this way. Found the first week hard, but things have been improving. Like all kids, their son has his ups and downs, but generally is a good kid.

A's Sister

Knew that her brother was in trouble, but wasn't sure what for. He was mostly a good brother.

B's Mother

Devastating to hear her son was involved. Affected all the family, other kids and grandparents. Felt physically sick when she received the phone call. His father was devastated - it has shattered the relationship between them (father and son). Been lots of tears at home. She was anxious for her son to participate in the conference, so he could learn and understand the consequences of his behaviour.

C's Significant Other

Asked how C's mother had been affected. Destroyed the trust she had with him. His older sister rang and gave him a roasting, letting him know she didn't like what he'd done. He's a good kid - just a bit cheeky sometimes.

D's Mother

Was devastated and asked whether the Deputy Principal was sure that it was her son involved. Her stomach was crawling as the news sank in. Openly upset when asked what was the hardest thing had been - the loss of trust and she didn't think her son would do anything like this.

D's Father

Disappointed. Upset. Shocked. Hardest thing was the loss of trust. All four boys probably didn't think about the impact of their decisions at the time, but have certainly learnt over the last 30-40 minutes.

ABCD were then asked if they had anything to say

A - Said he was sorry to Mum and Dad and that he would never do it again

B - Said he would never do it again. Let the school down. Sorry to his mother.

C - Initially said nothing, until asked what he would say to his mother, if she were here. He then dropped his head and through tears, said he would tell her he was sorry. Sorry, too, that he had affected the reputation of the school.

D - Said he was sorry.

The Agreement - where to from here?

Deputy Principal

In response to what he would like to see achieved - said he would like to see the boys appreciate the seriousness of the incident and to learn from it. Believed they were genuinely sorry, understood the impact of their behaviour and wouldn't do it again.

Principal

Hoped that the students understood the ripple effect of their behaviour - know that what they do in life always has an impact on others, especially those who care about them. Acknowledged that they had all had good families to assist them.

Welfare Teacher

Hoped students would realise the consequences of their behaviour and be able to move on from this point.

Convenor

Suggested it was important to bring closure to the matter. To understand what broader learning can occur. To enable parents to lift up their heads and feel OK about themselves. The learning ought not be restricted to the participants of the conference. Asked participants how the learning could be shared with others in the school.

A - Learnt that drugs are illegal, damage you and affect others

B - Tell others not to do it. It is wrong

C - Hurts people and it's wrong

D - Don't touch drugs. Don't do it. Won't do it again.

Suggested that students talk with the Welfare Teacher on how they could use this experience to influence others in a positive way. The parents were happy for the kids to explore this further.

(After the conference the boys in fact met with groups of their friends in class time and out of class and spoke of their experiences. The welfare teacher was amazed by what she heard them say about not realising the impact on others and how much they had hurt the people closest to them)

Police Youth Liaison Officer

Had put a lot of work in behind the scenes to enable the process to go ahead. If the boys had not been honest, there would have no other choice but to charge them. Saw this as a great learning opportunity. Had been upsetting to see the parents so upset, they were all so helpful. Thanked the kids for their honesty and allowing this to happen, as there would have been little learning through the court. It's happened now - but it could also be one of the best things to have happened - at least they have learnt this way.

Indicated to B that the best thing he could do was to be himself - that he didn't need to do drugs to be accepted.

In bringing the conference to a close

Participants offered the following thoughts:

- * Felt that good had come out of the process
- * Boys had learnt from the experience
- * Hope that the message had got through to other about drugs
- * Glad the YLO handled it this way
- * Hope that future decisions would be informed by this experience
- * Principal indicated that he had learnt something and acknowledged the support of the families
- * Suggestion that the boys learnt more than if they had gone to court

6. Conclusion

While these cases were relatively uncomplicated, and the conference was used for students, who were in all likelihood not "hardened" users, the success of the conferences illustrates the effectiveness of a restorative, transformative philosophy which underpins these practices and which applies equally well to more difficult cases, namely:

- * a philosophy of participation, political equality, non-tyranny and deliberation (in other words, the process is fully democratic)
- * the community of those most affected is the best placed to determine how to repair the harm caused by inappropriate behaviours (that is, those who did it and those who had it done to them)

- * an acknowledgement that victims, offenders and their respective communities of care need to be given the opportunity to talk about the impact of those behaviours on them.
- * a belief that offenders and victims and their communities of care have a right to learn from the experience and failing to confront them with the consequences of their actions does them a disservice.
- * having those affected present to talk about the impact on their lives is essential to that process of learning.
- * offenders more readily comply when an agreement is reached within and involves their community of care.
- * that the community of people brought together in a conference bear a collective responsibility for supporting that agreement.
- * resolutions should involve school and community resources.

Experts in the field of drug counselling caution us to be certain our interventions do two things: that the interventions do no further harm; and that the intervention is more likely to motivate the person to change their behaviour. The practice of conferencing, then, is consistent with this advice. Schools can carry an enormous responsibility to influence the behaviour of young people so they can participate in healthy ways and contribute to community cohesion and wellness as individuals, in their families and other groups, at work and at leisure. Schools are more likely to build that sense of responsibility for, and accountability to, each other when their attempts at behaviour change reflect a philosophy of restoration rather than retribution. The success of conferencing in a school community to rebuild community cohesion depends without a doubt on the preparation and technical skills of the facilitator, but more importantly on the school's willingness to embrace the values, beliefs and practices which build and rebuild relationships.

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