



Conferencing

The Community Justice Institute at Florida Atlantic University

Restorative Group Conferencing

“Restorative Group Conferencing” (RGC) encompasses a range of strategies for bringing together victims, offenders, and community members in non-adversarial community-based decision-making processes. These processes are aimed at responding to crime by holding offenders accountable for repairing the harm caused to victims and communities.

There are four primary restorative conferencing models: Victim-offender mediation, community reparative boards, circle sentencing, and family group conferencing. These four models do not exhaust the possibilities for community involvement in decisions about how to respond to youth crime but do illustrate both the diversity and adaptability themes apparent in what appears to be a new philosophy of citizen participation in justice decision-making.

Many practitioners involved in RGC notice a reduction in fear from victims when a conferencing process is used in lieu of court. The conferencing process is faster and seems to provide a more satisfying resolution to all parties involved.

Recent research indicates that there are approximately 800 programs nation-wide using RGC. These programs overwhelmingly report high levels of victim satisfaction with the process and low levels of recidivism by offenders.

Interest in and use of conferencing is being seen increasingly in schools and educational settings as a method of classroom management and an alternative to suspension and expulsion.

Where Conferencing Fits

- **Juvenile or Adult:** A conferencing process can be used with participants at any level of the system.
- **Diversion, Sentencing, Probation, Residential Facilities, or Re-entry:** Conferencing models are equally effective at all points along the criminal justice continuum and have been used at each of these stages.
- **Petit Theft or Manslaughter:** Conferencing can and has been used with any level of crime although the individual case will depend on the readiness of the stakeholders.
- **Criminal Justice, Schools, Family or Community:** Conferencing processes have been used effectively in response to a crime, a school infraction, child welfare issues, domestic violence, family disputes, or community issues.

www.cji.fau.edu or
www.barjproject.org

Curriculum-Based Conferencing Trainings offered by the CJI:

- Facilitating Restorative Group Conferences
- Training for Trainers Restorative Group Conferencing
- Restorative Justice Tools for Schools
- Neighborhood Accountability Board Training

Publications

- 2001 OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin: *A comparison of four restorative conferencing models* by Gordon Bazemore and Mark Umbreit
- 2004 Book: *Juvenile Justice Reform and Restorative Justice: Building Theory and Policy from Practice* by Gordon Bazemore and Mara Schiff



What Conferencing is All About

Conferencing Process

Restorative group conferencing is a face-to-face encounter between the victim(s), the offender(s), individuals who support each of them, and others who have been affected by a crime or harmful act. Led by a trained facilitator who has met with and prepared participants for the conference prior to coming together, the encounter seeks to identify and repair harm. The victim(s)'s participation is completely voluntary, and the participation of the offender is based upon their willingness and readiness. Grounded in restorative principles, restorative responses to a crime or a dispute, make a distinction between the harmful act and the actor.

In the end, decisions are reached by consensus of the participants in a process that seeks input from all equally and is aimed at repairing the harm and re-establishing relationships.

Goals of Conferencing

Goals of conferencing include:

Providing an opportunity for the victim to be directly involved in the discussion of the offense and the decisions regarding appropriate sanctions to be placed on the offender

Increasing the offender's awareness of the human impact of his or her behavior and providing the offender an opportunity to take full responsibility for it.

Engaging the collective responsibility of the offender's support system for making amends and shaping the offender's future behavior.

Allowing both offender and victim to reconnect to key community support systems.

Chart below taken from Bazemore and Unbreit, 2001

	Victim-Offender Mediation	Reparative Boards	Family Group Conferencing	Circle Sentencing
Who participates? (the community)	Mediator, victim, offender are standard participants. Parents often involved. Others occasionally involved.	Reparative coordinator (probation employee), community reparative board, offender and supporters, victim (on a limited basis). Youth panels (a related approach) use diversion staff.	Coordinator identifies key participants. Close kin of victim and offender invited. Police, social services, or other support persons also invited. Broader community not encouraged to participate.	Judge, prosecutor, defense counsel participate in serious cases. Victim(s), offender(s), service providers, support group present. Open to entire community. Justice committee ensures participation of key residents.
Victim role	Expresses feelings regarding crime and impact. Has major role in decision regarding offender obligation and content of reparative plan. Has ultimate right of refusal; consent is essential.	Input into plan sought by some boards. Inclusion of victims rare but currently encouraged; more active role being considered.	Expresses feelings about crime, gives input into reparative plan.	Participates in circle and decisionmaking; gives input into eligibility of offender, chooses support group, and may participate in a healing conference.
Gatekeepers	Courts and other entities make referrals.	Judge.	New Zealand: court and community justice coordinator. Australia and United States: police and school officials.	Community justice committee.
Relationship to formal system	Varies on continuum from core process in diversion and disposition to marginal programs with minimal impact on court caseloads.	One of several probation options for eligible low-risk offenders with minimal service needs. Plans to expand. Some impact on caseloads anticipated.	New Zealand: primary process of hearing juvenile cases, required ceding of disposition power, major impact on court caseloads. Australia (Wagga Wagga) and United States: police-driven process, variable impact on caseloads, concern regarding net-widening; in United States, used for very minor cases (most commonly shoplifting).	Judge, prosecution, court officials share power with community, i.e., selection, sanctioning, followup. Presently minimal impact on court caseloads.