

Implementing Restorative Practice in Social Work

Social work is operating under unprecedented pressure. Rising demand, workforce shortages, public scrutiny and increasingly complex family need have created systems that are often driven by fear, compliance and defensiveness. In this context, restorative practice offers not just a different methodology, but a fundamentally different way of working. It offers a powerful antidote to systems that can feel procedural, deficit-focused or unintentionally disempowering for the very people they aim to support.

The challenge for many Local Authorities is how to embed the practices in our everyday interactions. Embedding the restorative approach is not about adopting a new tool or running a one-off training session, it requires a cultural shift, a relational mindset and consistent modelling from leadership to frontline practice.

What follows is an exploration of how restorative practice can be implemented across social care systems and for day-to-day interactions.

1. Cultural Shift

Restorative practice thrives in environments where relationships, dignity and collaboration are valued. Before introducing new processes, organisations need to cultivate a culture that aligns with restorative principles. The key cultural shifts include:

- **Psychological safety:** In the wake of several high profile enquiries, staff have become more guarded. Staff need to feel safe to speak openly, admit mistakes and reflect without fear of blame.
- **Relational leadership:** Leaders need to model curiosity, empathy and accountability in their interactions if staff are to follow their lead.
- **Shared goals and shared language:** Teams need to be using restorative terminology consistently. They need to be validating each other, taking accountability of their actions and repairing any harm caused. Team meetings should be set up as a safe space to discuss difficult topics as well as celebrate achievements.
- **Anti-oppressive values:** Power is shared wherever possible and families are treated as partners rather than subjects of intervention.

Without these foundations, restorative practice risks becoming a superficial technique rather than a meaningful way of working.

2. Invest in high-quality experiential training

Training is essential but it must be more than a PowerPoint presentation. Restorative practice is relational and embodied, people need to experience it to get it and that is why high quality experienced training is needed.

All staff should take part in at least one half day introduction session with a core number of staff members involved in a deep dive three day training. These restorative champions will then cascade their learning (practice, values and philosophy) to the rest of their team and sector.

Effective training should include:

- **Circle practice:** Staff participate in restorative circles to feel the impact of equal voice and shared humanity.
- **Restorative conversations:** Practitioners practice using restorative questions in real scenarios.
- **Role-play/Skills practice and simulation:** Safe spaces to rehearse difficult conversations.
- **Reflective exercises:** Exploring personal triggers, shame responses, and communication habits.
- **Trauma-informed integration:** Understanding how restorative practice aligns with emotional regulation and safety.

Training should be ongoing, not a one-off event. Organisations that succeed often create internal restorative champions who continue modelling and coaching the approach.

3. Embed Restorative Conversations into Everyday Practice

Restorative practice becomes powerful when it shapes daily interactions, not just formal meetings.

Practitioners can use restorative approaches in:

- Home visits
- Case discussions

- Supervision
- Multi-agency meetings
- Conflict situations
- Conversations with children and young people

The core questions: *What happened? What were you thinking? Who has been affected? What is needed to move forward?* create space for voice, reflection and accountability. Changing our language to be more inclusive and less judgemental and using affirmative statements will improve relationships and open up new and useful dialogue. Over time, the approach becomes a natural part of how practitioners communicate.

4. Use Restorative Approaches in Formal Processes

To embed restorative practice systemically, organisations must integrate it into formal structures.

Examples include:

- **Restorative family meetings:** Using circle processes to bring families together in a respectful, structured way.
- **Family Group Conferences (FGCs):** Empowering families to lead their own planning.
- **Restorative reparation meetings:** Supporting family and young people to repair harm caused in the home, school, community and youth justice contexts.
- **Restorative child protection conferences:** Shifting from adversarial meetings to collaborative planning.
- **Restorative staff meetings:** modelling the approach internally.

When restorative principles shape formal processes, families experience a consistent relational ethos rather than isolated pockets of good practice.

5. Prioritise Relationship-Building as Core Practice

Restorative practice is fundamentally relational. Implementation requires a shift from task-driven to relationship-driven practice.

This means:

- Spending time building rapport before diving into assessment.
- Listening deeply rather than rushing to solutions.
- Being curious about behaviour rather than judging it.
- Acknowledging harm without shaming.
- Recognising strengths and resilience.
- Slowing down conversations to allow emotional regulation.

Relationships should not be seen as “soft extras” but rather the foundation for effective safeguarding, engagement and change.

6. Create Restorative Supervision and Team Spaces

Restorative practice cannot flourish if staff feel unsupported or blamed. Supervision and team culture must reflect restorative values.

Restorative supervision includes:

- Reflective dialogue rather than performance-driven interrogation.
- Exploration of emotional impact and moral distress.
- Curiosity about decision-making rather than judgement.
- Space to repair ruptures between colleagues.
- Encouragement of accountability without shame.

Teams can use restorative circles to address conflict, support practice, celebrate successes and build cohesion. When staff experience restorative practice internally, they are far more able to offer it externally.

7. Address Power Imbalances Explicitly

Restorative practice requires conscious attention to power both between professionals and families and within organisations.

Implementation strategies:

- Seek to work WITH rather than doing it TO or FOR.
- Use plain language (Jargon free).
- Share decision-making wherever possible.
- Be transparent about concerns, risks and expectations.

- Invite families to challenge professional assumptions.
- Ensure meetings are structured so all voices are heard.
- Encourage practitioners to reflect on their own positionality and biases.

Restorative practice is not about relinquishing professional responsibility, it is about exercising authority in a relational, respectful and transparent way.

8. Build Multi-Agency Alignment

Restorative practice is most effective when schools, police, health services and social care share a common approach.

Multi-agency implementation includes:

- Joint training sessions.
- Shared restorative language across systems.
- Restorative responses to conflict between agencies.
- Collaborative restorative meetings for complex cases.
- Agreed protocols for restorative responses to harm.

When families experience consistent relational practice across services, trust and engagement increase significantly.

9. Measure What Matters

Traditional metrics often focus on compliance, timescales and outputs. Restorative practice requires new ways of evaluating success.

Useful indicators include:

- Quality of relationships.
- Family engagement and participation.
- Reduction in conflict and complaints.
- Improved staff wellbeing and retention.
- Increased disclosure of risk factors.
- Family-led safety planning.
- Sustainability of change.

Qualitative feedback: stories, reflections, lived experience is as important as quantitative data and will tell you more about the values of staff, team or organisation than the cold numbers printed on a spreadsheet.

10. Sustain the Work Through Leadership and Modelling

Implementation is not a project with an end date. It is a long-term cultural transformation.

Leaders sustain restorative practice by:

- Modelling restorative behaviour in all interactions.
- Addressing conflict restoratively rather than punitively.
- Protecting time for reflective practice.
- Celebrating relational work, not just procedural compliance.
- Ensuring policies align with restorative values.
- Embedding restorative practice into induction, supervision, and appraisal.

When leaders embody the approach, it becomes part of the organisation's identity rather than a temporary initiative.

Conclusion

The question for social care leaders is no longer whether restorative practice is aligned with our values but whether our systems are brave enough to support it. Implementation requires courage, consistency and commitment but the alternative is to continue operating in ways that exhaust practitioners and alienate families. Restorative practice offers a different future for social work, one grounded in dignity, humanity and hope.

Implementing restorative practice challenging. It requires cultural change, relational leadership and consistent modelling across all levels of an organisation. The rewards however are profound: stronger relationships, better engagement, reduced conflict, improved outcomes and a more humane system for families and practitioners alike.

Restorative practice is not simply a method, it is a way of being. When embedded thoughtfully and consistently, it transforms not only how we work

but how people experience a social care system that treats them with dignity, voice and hope.

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