

## **Overview of Accountability Circles**

### **Evolution of the Restorative Resources Accountability Circles**

The accountability circle was initially created and developed as a supplemental component to restorative conferencing. It arose from the observation that many youth who were referred to the Restorative Resources office from juvenile probation for restorative conferencing simply did not have the basic understanding and capacity required to engage with the restorative process appropriately. It was clear that many youth needed an extended preparatory period in order to begin accepting responsibility for their decisions and actions and be receptive to hearing from the people that were affected by those decisions and actions, both of which are necessary attitudes for a successful restorative process.

As such, the accountability circle program began as a way to meet this need by offering these youth weekly two-hour circles with other youth who had also been referred by probation as a diversion from the juvenile justice system. These youth then had a space to share their story, learn important life skills, and develop an understanding of the restorative process that they are involved in. Furthermore, the accountability circle also provided a venue for supporting the youth in completing their restorative action plan, which is developed during the restorative conference and contains action items that make amends to individuals who were harmed by the incident of wrongdoing. After this addition to the restorative process began showing great success, the accountability circles later became available to students who were facing expulsion for harmful actions taking place in their school. To this day, the accountability circle remains available to all secondary schools in Santa Rosa City Schools, as well as youth referred from juvenile probation.

More recently, the accountability circle has begun to be used in settings where restorative conferencing is either not emphasized or entirely absent. One example of this is an accountability circle that is held in the long-term unit of juvenile hall. The other is the accountability circles held at Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) community schools, Headwaters in Petaluma and Amarosa Academy in Santa Rosa. Starting in the fall of 2015, weekly accountability circles have been started on-site at certain select schools within the Santa Rosa City Schools district.

These accountability circles developed from an awareness that simply providing youth with an open, yet structured space for honest dialogue that challenges previously held attitudes can provide the opportunity for untold benefits, independent from a restorative process aimed at repairing harm for a specific incident. The youth in these circles have usually been involved in a long list of harmful incidents, so rather than focusing on any particular one, the objective is to encourage honest reflection on the perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors that have brought the youth to their current circumstances, which in many cases include suspension or expulsion from their school or district and/or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

From this view, there are certain basic questions that are put to them in various ways repeatedly throughout the circle dialogue. In general they are:

- Who are you truly?
- What does your life mean to you?
- How are your attitudes and decisions supporting or detracting from your life?
- How can you learn to use your inherent power in life-affirming ways?
- How does your individual life form a part of the greater life of your community?
- What do you value about the world?

These questions summarize the overall orientation of the accountability circle process, which is meant to provide an experiential platform for youth to make deep-seated changes in their relationship to themselves and how they live, allowing them to take their rightful place as a creative participant in the life of the community. At its heart, the accountability circle is a process of initiation, where youth can gain direct insight

into the power and purpose of being human, and with this insight, they can step onto the path that leads to maturity.

The process of assuming real responsibility as human beings seamlessly lends itself to restorative practices and the restorative circle format. Responsibility is one of the starting points of all restorative 4 practices. One of the foundational principles of restorative practices is an awareness that everything is connected and that people's choices in attitude, action, and speech affect other people, and our world, whether we acknowledge those effects or not. The beginning of responsibility in a restorative sense is to recognize this principle in action in one's own life, perhaps for the first time. It means actually seeing, hearing, and understanding how one's actions have had an impact, especially if those impacts are harmful. It also means making a commitment to offer concrete amends to those who were negatively affected and to take determined steps to prevent future incidents of harm.

The other piece to this is the way that restorative dialogue in circle naturally invites youth to begin recognizing that they have something of value to contribute to the world. This recognition of value is a source of power. When this value is authentically lived, both the individual person and the world as a whole are intrinsically enhanced. From this recognition comes a natural desire to bring that value forth, first in the protected community setting of the circle, where it can be appreciated and witnessed by the other circle participants. Later, from this gradual unfolding, youth can begin to live from a place of authenticity outside of the circle container and have the capability to assume the responsibility they have previously neglected.

### **Accountability Circle Dialogue Topics**

There are eleven core accountability circle dialogue topics that all youth who graduate from the initiation process are exposed to at some point.

1. Restorative Justice and the Restorative Circle
2. Power Through Stories
3. Respect
4. Empathy and Compassion
5. Making Things Right
6. Apologies
7. Anger
8. Violence
9. Decision-Making
10. Life Goals
11. Critical Values

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