

Replace Suspensions with **RESET ROOMS**

A restorative
practice innovation

by Melissa Peterson Malen, PhD



HAVE YOU SPENT MORE TIME in the principal's office as a parent of a child with ADHD than you ever did as a student? ADHD is difficult to manage in school, for students and teachers. Parents dread discipline calls from school—the ones where the school notifies you that your child is suspended from class or out of school.

Students with ADHD are often suspended for offenses that are not “zero tolerance” behaviors. Examples of minor offenses that get them suspended are yelling, diverting attention away from the teacher, not staying seated, frequent use of profanity, or anything considered defiance. It's no surprise that boys with ADHD are second most likely to get suspended from class or from school (Bowman-Perrott, 2013).

As students with ADHD enter middle school and high school, chances of being suspended go up and the chance of achieving goes down (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). As an ADHD coach, I see students get suspended often for behaviors that could have been addressed during the school day. I work with a tenth-grade boy with ADHD who was recently given a three-day out-of-school suspension for being in a group of boy and girl students that walked into the girls' bathroom for five seconds during an evening basketball game. The administrators explained that the

boy needed severe discipline to “wake him up” to turn his behavior around. Do you think this punitive action would do more harm or good for the student? Fortunately, the administrators reconsidered their decision after several discussions.

Suspensions don't work

Suspension is punitive and does not improve student behavior (Fenning, 2011). Suspension is a discipline that does more harm than good to students because it isolates them from teachers and peers. Student learning also suffers, as noted by multiple authors: “Schools with high suspension use have shown lower mean scores on state achievement tests than schools with lower suspension use” (Noltemeyer, 2015; Rausch & Skiba, 2004). Furthermore, time spent in suspension does not provide students training on social skills, self-regulation, or restorative practice. Students just get one more experience of not being wanted in school.

Restorative practice works

Instead of removing students from the school, restorative practice focuses on keeping students in school and building relationships among all members of the school community. Repairing relationships is also a focus (Winn, 2018). What a great benefit

this is to students with ADHD! Instead of being kicked out of class after behaving impulsively, distracting others with their lively attention-getting actions, or nonstop talking, these students are engaged in a relationship-based discussion with the teacher or a staff member. Students get a chance to learn about their behavior, how it affects others, and what to do when they need support to manage their behavior.

Restorative interventions turn the tables for students with ADHD because teachers engage and coach the students when they are being disruptive, instead of rejecting them by sending them out of class. As a result of suspension, students feel they are not wanted in class, embarrassed, and frustrated over not being able to manage impulsive behavior even though they want to behave. The daily struggle for students with ADHD and their parents is for the student to manage their behavior so they can feel accepted. Parents reflecting on this challenge say, "That year sat very heavily on my heart," and "He was always the naughty one." Parents feel distraught when they hear their child say, "Mom, my teacher doesn't like me" (Peterson-Malen, 2013).

The restorative intervention does not isolate students from peers and teachers. Instead, it facilitates communication, empathy for the student, and emotional and behavioral coaching between the teacher or staff and the student. Parents say about teachers who are empathetic, "She gets my child!" and about restorative practice that "there was a strong relationship between student, parent and school" (Peterson-Malen, 2013). Amazing results occur, such as improved student behavior and feeling of belonging at school, fewer absences, and increased achievement.

Reset Room: to regulate and repair

The Focus and Learning Center collaborated with a middle school in St. Paul, Minnesota, to remodel an in-school suspension room into a Reset Room where punishment and isolation is replaced with restorative practice, relationship building, and behavior coaching. Students learn how to manage their behavior, regulate their emotions, and return to the conflict ready to communicate and repair relationships.

In the Reset Room, students are not punished and kicked out of class. They are asked to visit the Reset Room to regulate their emotions and behavior so they can return to class or later in the day and talk with the teacher to repair relationships. When students arrive in the Reset Room, they log in on a Google form on an iPad and share what's going on. Then, surprise! They use exercise to regulate their emotions. They get on a spin bike or a yoga mat, and they exercise their way to calm and focus. Research by John Ratey, PhD, tells us that exercise reduces stress and increases attention due to the endorphins and dopamine produced, so why not use exercise instead of punishment to help students reset and return to class?

Students have a restorative conversation with a staff member, and then fill out a communication card that helps them know what they would like to say and to whom in order to repair the

relationship and feel accepted in returning to class. Teachers marvel at the shift in student and peer behavior: "Before the Reset Room, peers would egg on a student until the student was so disruptive that they were sent to in-school suspension, but now the same peers encourage students to ask for a pass to the Reset Room before they get in trouble." The opportunity that students have to ask for a pass before they meet the discipline threshold is empowering for students learning to manage their behavior.

Students and teachers view the Reset Room as a place that helps students learn to manage their behavior and their relationships. Discipline incidents at the school have dropped significantly. The Reset Room is a unique tool that allows schools to use exercise to improve attention and achievement. It is a place where restorative practices of empathy for students and repair of communication and relationships between students and peers and students can be taught.

Students with ADHD face many challenges in school. Suspensions are not the way to help students with ADHD; restorative practice is the way to go. Schools can easily remodel in-school suspension rooms into Reset Rooms by removing punishment, adding exercise equipment, and establishing a restorative practice. **A**

Melissa Peterson Malen, PhD, is the owner of AxyLu Academic Coaching, LLC, co-founder of the nonprofit Focus and Learning Center, and volunteers as vice president of the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented. She specializes in coaching students and adults who experience performance challenges in the areas of executive function and self-regulation. Dr. Malen coaches clients that have ADHD, dyslexia, nonverbal learning disability, or are twice exceptional. She presents at conferences in the US and internationally, both in-person and virtually, and also provides professional development for teachers and counselors. She earned an MA in counseling psychology from the University of St. Thomas and a PhD in education from the University of Minnesota. Dr. Malen has researched the experience of parents of students with ADHD and is developing programs targeted at improving student underachievement.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Bowman-Perrott, L., Benz, M. R., Hsu, H.-Y., Kwok, O.-M., Eisterhold, L. A., & Zhang, D. (2013). Patterns and Predictors of Disciplinary Exclusion Over Time: An Analysis of the SEELS National Data Set. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 21(2), 83-96.
- Camacho, K., & Krezmien, M., (2020) A statewide analysis of school discipline policies and suspension practices, *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 64:1, 55-66.
- Fenning, P., Pulaski, S., Gomez, M., Morello, M., Maciel, L., Maroney, E., Schmidt, A., Dahlvig, K., McArdle, L., Morello, T., Wilson, R., Horwitz, A., & Maltese, R. (2012) Call to Action: A Critical Need for Designing Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion, *Journal of School Violence*, 11:2, 105-117.
- Noltemeyer, A., Ward, R., & McLoughlin, C., Vanderwood, M., (Associate Editor) (2015) Relationship Between School Suspension and Student Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis, *School Psychology Review*, 44:2, 224-240.
- Peterson-Malen, Melissa. (2013). Phenomenological study of the experience of parent advocates of students diagnosed with ADHD. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/159136>.
- Ratey, John J, and Eric Hagerman. Spark: *The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. New York: Little, Brown, 2008.
- Rausch, M. K., & Skiba, R. (2004). Unplanned outcomes: Suspensions and expulsions in Indiana. *Education Policy Briefs*, 2(2), 1-8. Retrieved from http://ceep.indiana.edu/projects/PDF/PB_V2N2_Unplanned Outcomes.pdf
- Winn, M. (2018). *Justice on Both Sides: Transforming Education Through Restorative Justice*, Harvard Educational Press, Cambridge, MA.