

Conflict Resolution in Schools

It's easier than you think!

What can you do to help reduce the frequency and severity of conflict in your school? The answer may not be as complicated as you think! With a few simple, EASY techniques you can help to improve the learning environment at your school.

Shawn is in the 7th grade and is excited to show Josh and Craig his MP3 player. Shawn knows he is not allowed to have it at school, but he can not help himself. At lunch, Shawn sneaks it out of his book bag. Josh can't wait to listen to it with him on the bus after school. Craig feels a little differently. His family can not afford to buy him an MP3 player, let alone the IPOD with video that Shawn has. Craig threatens to take Shawn's pride and joy. Shawn yells back at Craig. Despite their increasing loudness, the cafeteria sounds help to drown the noise from the teachers who are on lunch duty. The argument progresses into Shawn punching Craig. At this point, the entire lunch room has formed the infamous circle around the boys. The teachers break through, just before anyone really gets physically hurt.

What:

Conflict has many different meanings. To put it simply, it is a non-agreement between parties. It can be physical, verbal or both. Different programs and schools have different ways of operationalizing conflict. Refer to your student handbook to find out how your school defines it.

Research shows that the "frequency and severity of conflicts (in schools) seem to be increasing... 'fighting, violence and gangs' are tied with 'lack of discipline' for the biggest problems in public schools" (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, Conflict Resolution, p. 459).

Just as conflict has many forms, conflict resolution can be something as simple as saying "stop" to peer mediation to newer styles. Some schools have peer mediation, which has its origin in the 1960's (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, Teaching all). Others use curriculum modules to teach diversity and understanding.



Image Courtesy of German Alvarado— <http://www.sxc.hu>

The curriculum focus can be specific to the needs of the school or may choose to approach it by examining conflict in terms of countries, history and policies. Some schools rely on a discipline only technique. With all methods of conflict resolution, training and feedback are necessary to create a successful program.

So What:

Conflict resolution has become a vital tool in today's schools. Some schools adapt different programs to address the behavior issues. Schools have become famous (or infamous) for their zero-tolerance policies on violence. Many of the day to day issues teachers face that violate the behavior codes can be addressed on the spot without making an office disciplinary referral (ODR). Many teachers and students need to value conflict and find ways to turn them into positives. (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, Conflict Resolution) Peer mediation is the most commonly used program in schools. In many schools, peer mediation is not available to all students, but rather selected ones. Most of the selected students have histories of covering the entire range of conflict. The original peer mediation program was designed in the 1960's and was called "Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers". This method was comprised of five parts: "a cooperative learning environment, an atmosphere in which the nature & desirability of conflict are understood, a problem-solving negotiation procedure, a peer-mediation procedure and frequent follow-up lessons to refine and upgrade student's skills in using the negotiation and mediation procedures" (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, Teaching All, p.323). Today, the program varies as to whether all students are taught to be mediators or only selected ones. They can occur during class time. While the research comes under scrutiny for possibly biases, it does show that there are some benefits. The benefits cannot be generalized to the whole as different schools and classrooms take up the methods differently.

Training. Yes, the dreaded word! Despite the lack of enthusiasm that is experienced with some administration-ordered trainings, attending one on conflict resolution can give you instant benefits. Many teacher trainings on conflict resolution are a few hours in length and are more instruction than demonstration. "Educators need 15-20 demonstrations and a dozen or more opportunities for practice to master a new teaching strategy" (Opffer, 1997, p.49). When using a curriculum-based conflict resolution program, the teacher must have a solid understanding of the material. This type of education is not given in college. Curriculum based programs are gaining popularity as they include the entire student population, not just those who have conflict issues. Teaching students about integrity, diversity, acceptance and understanding can help students to handle situations before reaching levels requiring intervention.

"I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: 'The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that's fair.' In these words he epitomized the history of the human race."

-Bertrand Russell



Image courtesy of Jyn Meyer—www.sxc.hu

Now What:

Here are some tips you can use for teaching and using conflict resolution in your school or classroom:

- ◆ Don't forget about your own –isms! Racism, sexism, homophobia, sense of power and other biases influence how you handle a situation. The student also has their own set of –isms, which may not coincide with yours. Try to work them through their –isms to reach a positive conclusion. (Prutzman & Johnson, 1997)
- ◆ Work with the student/s rather than dictate to them. When the student feels that they are being heard and that their say so has meaning to an adult, they are more likely to conduct themselves in a more positive behavior in future conflicts. (Bickmore, 2001)
- ◆ Utilize school programs like peer mediation and “group”. These programs have shown to be successful when carried out fully. (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, Conflict resolution) If your school has trained selected students to be peer mediators, rely on their skills to help. Newer peer mediation programs are using trained students to teach teachers how to handle conflict.
- ◆ Team up with other teachers to discuss techniques that work and those that don't.
- ◆ Be willing to attend trainings and give your full attention during them! Some points may seem repetitive and obvious but remember, when you are teaching/using the behavior, those watching you may not have ever seen anything like that before.
- ◆ Try alternative methods. Some districts are creating more democratic peer-mediation systems by allowing some students more autonomous action in resolving conflict (Bickmore, 2001). By allowing some students to be leaders, they are more likely to use their skills.
- ◆ Be in it for the long haul! Anytime a new policy or procedure is set in place, there are wrinkles that have to be ironed out. You do not have to be a “lone ranger” trying to change the school yourself. Working in teams has been shown to be much more effective (Opffer, 1997).
- ◆ Use the School Mediation Association's Five Stage Mediation Process:
 1. Welcome the Parties
 2. Discover the Stories—Let each child tell their side uninterrupted
 3. Dig Deeper—Work with the children to find out what the deeper reasoning was as to why they acted the way that they did.
 4. Build Agreement-Reach a conclusion with all parties as to what the appropriate changes need to be made and what, if any, consequences should result.
 5. End the Session—Give a definitive end to the meeting and let participants know that this also marks the end of the verbal or physical altercation.

But why do they do it???

Why do children, and all people for that matter, act the way that they do? Richard C. Robertiello offers us a great and easy to understand way to think about self-esteem and decision making. He created a four point system (phrased here as questions) that gives justification for actions.

For the actor/student, does/is the action :

Decrease anxiety?

Increase influence/power in an area of importance ?

Give visible evidence of accomplishment?

Compatible with values/developmental stage?

The next time you find yourself getting into an argument with a student over why they didn't complete an assignment or why Jane was passing notes, think about these questions. For Jane, the note may decrease anxiety from not understanding the lesson. She may feel power over the teacher as she is "in charge" of what is going on. Jane may feel accomplished when the note is successfully received. Passing the note fits well within her developmental level. This model does not only apply to the school setting. Try applying this to your hobbies (cooking, gardening, building, reading) and why Uncle Joe insists on telling those inappropriate jokes at your Thanksgiving dinner!

These websites will give you great starting points to incorporating conflict resolution in your classroom:

New Jersey State Bar Foundation:

http://www.njsbf.com/njsbf/student/conflictres/middle_high.cfm

This website is a guide for implementing a conflict resolution curriculum in schools. This volume is directed towards middle and high schools. It includes a lesson on mediation as well as definitions. The lessons can be used with both students and teachers to foster skills in equality and understanding.

University of Colorado at Boulder: <http://www.crinfo.org/menu/education.jsp>

This site offers links to funding sources, teaching materials, lists of articles and books as well as organizations. This is a great starting point for gaining knowledge on what is available.

Educators for Social Responsibility: <http://www.esrnational.org>

Site requires users to register (it's free!). There are lesson plans on "conflict resolution", "understanding others", "human rights" and "making a difference" that can be downloaded. They offer lesson plans for all grade levels. There are also links to countering bullying, harassment as well as discrimination.

Websites continued:

School Mediation Associates: <http://www.schoolmediation.com>

This site has great news articles as well as links to books on techniques and research. There is also a visual description of the SMA Five Stage Mediation Process.

Bibliography

Bickmore, Kathy (2001). Student conflict resolution, power “sharing in schools, and citizenship. *Curriculum Inquiry*. 31. No. 2, 137-162.

Close, Carole L, & Lechman, Kathy (1997). Foster youth leadership: Students train students and adults in conflict resolution. *Theory Into Practice*. 36 No. 1, 11-16.

Peer instructed and student instructed programs on conflict resolution are addressed in this article. This is a great concept! Students learn more if they are the ones teaching. This technique utilizes students as co-creators of instruction to help alleviate issues that students are dealing with. This article could give some ideas on how to implement conflict resolution strategies in your classroom.

Johnson, David W, & Johnson, Roger T (1996). Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in elementary and secondary schools: A review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*. 66, 459-506.

This article reviews different programs that have been created to address conflict resolution. There are over 2,000 conflict resolution programs in the United States’ schools today. A history of conflict resolution is also given.

Johnson, David W, & Johnson, Roger T (1998). Teaching all students how to manage conflicts constructively: The peacemakers program. *Journal of Negro Education*. 65 No. 3, 322-335.

This article gives the procedures of the Teaching Students to be Peacemakers program. It is a school wide conflict resolution and peer mediation program that works with grades 1 through 12. This program teaches students to understand conflict and to be able to move beyond the conflict to a higher understanding of the situation. This program was designed for diverse schools. This article focuses on the positive outcomes of conflict when students utilize effective resolution techniques. This technique is unique in that it wants to use conflict as a positive means of growth rather than being conflict-avoidant/zero-tolerance.

Bibliography continued

Opffer, Elenie (1997). Toward cultural transformation: Comprehensive approaches to conflict resolution. *Theory Into Practice*. 36 No. 1, 46-52.

This article focuses on when peer mediation is not as successful as it could be. A cause of its failure is due to cultural differences that occur in the school. This article addresses the benefits and limits of peer mediation. To achieve a successful program, students must be able to move beyond the situation. They learn these skills from trained educators. The problem lies in one or two day trainings for staff. The skills necessary to effectively resolve school conflict need to be practiced and demonstrated more than a dozen times.

Prutzman, Priscilla, & Johnson, Judith (1997). Bias awareness and multiple perspectives: Essential aspects of conflict resolution. *Theory Into Practice*. 36 No. 1, 26-31.

This article examines an important point, namely the effect that -isms (racism, sexism, anti-Semitism) and other biases have on the level of conflict. History has shown that a lack of acceptance can cause altercations. Many programs are now including diversity education as part of the requirements of implementing successful conflict resolution programs.

School Mediation Associates (2008). Peer mediation from school mediation associates. Retrieved April 7, 2008, from School Mediation Associates Web site: www.schoolmediation.com

This website was discussed in the web site section.



Image courtesy of OBRAPRIMA—www.sxc.hu

