

Teaching School-based Conflict Resolution

Too many of our young people are caught up in conflicts every day that they do not know how to manage -- teasing, jealousy, and physical aggression. Juvenile delinquency and violence are symptoms of youth's inability to manage conflict in their lives. Teaching youth how to manage conflict in a productive way can help reduce incidents of violent behavior. Conflict resolution education is a beneficial component of a comprehensive violence prevention and intervention program in schools and communities.

Conflict resolution education encompasses problem solving in which the parties in dispute express their points of view, voice their interests, and find mutually acceptable solutions. Conflict resolution education programs help the parties recognize that while conflict happens all the time, people can learn new skills to deal with conflict in nonviolent ways. The programs that appear to be most effective are comprehensive and involve multiple components such as the problem-solving processes and principles of conflict resolution, the basics of effective communication and listening, critical and creative thinking, and an emphasis on personal responsibility and self-discipline.

Effective conflict resolution education programs can:

- Enable children to respond nonviolently to conflict by using the conflict resolution problem-solving processes of negotiation, mediation, and consensus decision-making.
- Enable educators' ability to manage students' behavior without coercion by emphasizing personal responsibility and self-discipline.
- Mobilize community involvement in violence prevention through education programs and services, such as expanding the role of youth as effective citizens beyond the school into the community.

Four Common Strategies for Approaching Conflict Resolution

Experts identify four school-based conflict resolution strategies that can be replicated in other settings. These are commonly referred to as: (1) Peer Mediation, (2) Process Curriculum, (3) Peaceable Classrooms, and (4) Peaceable Schools. In all four approaches, conflict resolution education is viewed as giving youth nonviolent tools to deal with daily conflicts that can lead to self-destructive and violent behaviors. It is up to each local school district to decide how conflict resolution education will be integrated into its overall educational environment. The expectation is that when youth learn to recognize and constructively address what takes place before conflict or differences lead to violence, the incidence and intensity of that situation will diminish.

The program examples provided below empower young people with the processes and skills of conflict resolution. However, youth need to know that conflict resolution does not take precedence over adult responsibility to provide the final word in a variety of circumstances or situations. Conflict resolution has a place in the home, school, and community, but it can only supplement, not supplant, adult authority.

1) Peer Mediation Approach

Recognizing the importance of directly involving youth in conflict resolution, many schools and communities are using the Peer Mediation approach. Under this approach, specially trained student mediators work with their peers to resolve conflicts. Mediation programs reduce the use of traditional disciplinary actions such as suspension, detention, and expulsion; encourage effective problem solving; decrease the need for teacher involvement in student conflicts; and improve school climate.

An example of a Peer Mediation program is *We Can Work It Out*, developed by the National Institute for Citizenship Education in the Law and the National Crime Prevention Council. The program promotes mediation, negotiation, or other non-litigating methods as strategies to settle unresolved confrontations and fighting.

One Albuquerque elementary school principal reported, "We were having 100 to 150 fights every month on the playground before we started the New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution's Mediation in the Schools Program. By the end of the school year, we were having maybe 10 (fights)." Other elementary schools using the same Peer Mediation approach to conflict resolution education reported that playground fighting had been reduced to such an extent that peer mediators found themselves out of a job.

Process Curriculum Approach

Teachers who devote a specific time -- a separate course, a distinct curriculum, or a daily lesson -- to the principles, foundation abilities, and problem-solving processes of conflict resolution are implementing the Process Curriculum approach. The Program for Young Negotiators, based on the Harvard Negotiation Project, is representative of this approach. Participating students, teachers, and administrators are taught how to use principled negotiation to achieve goals and resolve disputes. This type of negotiation helps disputants envision scenarios and generate options for achieving results that satisfy both sides.

In a North Carolina middle school with more than 700 students, conflict resolution education was initiated. The school used the Peace Foundation's Fighting Fair curriculum and a combination of components from various conflict resolution projects. After a school year, in-school suspensions decreased from 52 to 30 incidents (a 42-percent decrease), and out-of-school suspensions decreased from 40 incidents to 1 (a 97-percent decrease).

Peaceable Classroom Approach

The Peaceable Classroom approach integrates conflict resolution into the curriculum and daily management of the classroom. It uses the instructional methods of cooperative learning and "academic controversy." The Educators for Social Responsibility curriculum, *Making Choices About Conflict, Security, and Peacemaking*, is a peaceable classroom approach to conflict resolution. The program shows teachers how to integrate conflict resolution into the curriculum, classroom management, and discipline practices. It emphasizes opportunities to practice cooperation, appreciation of diversity, and caring and effective communication. Generally, peaceable classrooms are initiated on a teacher-by-teacher basis into the classroom setting and are the building blocks of the peaceable school.

Studies on the effectiveness of the Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers program, a Peaceable Classroom approach to conflict resolution, show that discipline problems requiring teacher management decreased by approximately 80 percent and referrals to the principal were reduced to zero.

Peaceable School Approach

The Peaceable School approach incorporates the above three approaches. This approach seeks to create schools where conflict resolution has been adopted by every member of the school community, from the crossing guard to the classroom teacher. A peaceable school promotes a climate that challenges youth and adults to believe and act on the understanding that a diverse, nonviolent society is a realistic goal.

In creating the Peaceable School Program of the Illinois Institute for Dispute Resolution, students are empowered with conflict resolution skills and strategies to regulate and control their

own behavior. Conflict resolution is infused into the way business is conducted at the school between students, between students and teachers and other personnel, between teachers and administrators, and between parents and teachers and administrators.

In an evaluation of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program in four multiethnic school districts in New York City, teachers of the Peaceable School approach to conflict resolution reported a 71-percent decrease in physical violence in the classroom and observed 66 percent less name calling and fewer verbal insults. Other changes in student behavior reported by the teachers included greater acceptance of differences, increased awareness and articulation of feelings, and a spontaneous use of conflict resolution skills throughout the school day in a variety of academic and nonacademic settings.

The effective conflict resolution education programs highlighted above have helped to improve the climate in school, community and juvenile justice settings by reducing the number of disruptive and violent acts in these settings; by decreasing the number of chronic school absences due to a fear of violence; by reducing the number of disciplinary referrals and suspensions; by increasing academic instruction during the school day; and by increasing the self-esteem and self-respect, as well as the personal responsibility and self-discipline of the young people involved in these programs.

Young people cannot be expected to promote and encourage the peaceful resolution of conflicts if they do not see conflict resolution principles and strategies being modeled by adults in all areas of their lives, such as in business, sports, entertainment, and personal relationships. Adults play a part in making the environment more peaceful by practicing nonviolent conflict resolution when minor or major disputes arise in their daily lives.

(Information provided by the U.S. Department of Education.)