

Conflict Resolution

Module 7

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Every morning it was the same story. Shantea and Melissa got off the morning bus angry.

“These two were at it again.” Their bus driver, Mrs. Arnold, sighed as she wrote the bus detention for the third time. “And it’s always over nothing---what one of them said, or something they texted the night before. You’d think these kids would just cut it out.”

Their middle school vice principal, Mr. McCarty, shook his head. “Under the district rules I have to suspend them both from transportation if this happens again. I’m sure they know that, but I’ll remind them one more time.”

Mrs. Fritz, the school counselor overheard the conversation in the office and made a suggestion. “Hey, why don’t we try conflict resolution for them? I just finished the training for the sixth grade peer mediator, and this is a case the mediators should be able to handle. I can supervise it, in case a problem arises.”

Mr. McCarty agreed. “I’d try anything, because suspension is a last resort and a huge hassle for both of their mothers. They both work and take public transportation. And the girls are good students otherwise.”

Mrs. Fritz called Melissa and Shantea to her office later that morning and explained how the new sixth grade conflict resolution worked. “You will learn how to express your complaint to the other person calmly and politely so the other person can hear what you are trying to say. And you will learn steps to help you listen and come to a solution, too. Two trained sixth graders will be there to coach you. I’m sure you’ll like this better than having Mr. McCarty or Mrs. Arnold settle this for you.”

Then, Mrs. Fritz made an appointment for Shantea and Melissa to meet with their two peer mediators over lunch, for the first of three mediation sessions. She also reminded them of the school-wide discipline code and the consequences of ongoing verbal outbursts on the bus.

Description of Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution programs, or conflict resolution education (CRE) help students resolve interpersonal conflicts. CRE can take several forms, but the three primary models are:

- (a) Direct skills instruction---in a group or individually students learn specific steps for recognizing, discussing, and resolving their interpersonal conflicts.
- (b) Peer mediation---a small group of students train to be peer mediators for their peers and meet with students who are having problems to coach them through the problem-solving steps.
- (c) Curriculum embedded instruction and exercises---teachers systematically embed examples and exercises highlighting conflict resolution into their regular curricula (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007).

CRE often is confused with other interventions such as bullying prevention and character education, so it's important to know the five distinguishing characteristics of a true CRE model. Here are the critical components outlined by Garrard and Lipsey (2007):

- 1) Although there may be other benefits, CRE has the successful resolution of interpersonal conflict as its primary goal.
- 2) CRE addresses only "Low to moderate risk overt interpersonal events characterized by opposition . . ." (p. 11).
- 3) Building students' capacity to resolve their own problems is the goal of CRE---hence, the name *education*. While a side benefit is the resolution of an immediate problem, the ultimate goal is to teach new skills.
- 4) The program content focuses on conflict and the strategies for resolving conflict, such as self-regulation, acceptance of another's point of view, mutual problem solving, and communications. Other content may emerge (e.g., friendship skills or bullying prevention).
- 5) CRE requires teaching the skills, modeling them, and affording students opportunities for guided practice.

From this description, it is possible to detect that CRE is a *systematic process* that requires a high level of organization and support within a school.

Research that Supports Conflict Resolution

Older reviews of research on CRE offered mixed reviews of its effectiveness (Gerber & Terry-Day, 1999; Powell, Muir-McClain, & Halasyamani, 1995). In many cases, the results of CRE programs could not be determined because the design of the studies did not allow others to create generalizable programs or the programs themselves were not implemented as originally designed. The latter issue, which is known as *implementation fidelity*, is a key factor in how well CRE works.

In a more recent meta-analysis covering 25 years of CRE studies, the results were more promising. That is, Garrard and Lipsey (2007) conducted a review of CRE and identified 36 studies that met the criteria for describing a true CRE model. These studies involved nearly

5000 students in U.S. K-12 schools where one of the three CRE models was offered. Their research indicated that the *choice of model* of CRE (e.g., peer mediation vs. embedded curriculum) did not make a significant difference in desired outcomes (i.e., decreases in antisocial behaviors that resulting in school disciplinary sanctions). It is also encouraging to note that students benefited from programs that required only two hours or less a week for a total of fifteen or *fewer* hours of participation (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007).

Other studies have shown that CRE is effective with students in middle and high schools. As Garrard and Lipsey (2007) concluded, “adolescence may represent a window of opportunity where the increased need for interpersonal conflict resolution aligns with students’ readiness to benefit from the CRE programs of modest intensity and duration” (p. 27). On the other hand, CRE did not result in meaningful change in students under the age of 10 years. [For mediation programs for preschoolers, see the HighScope Educational Research Foundation’s website and related resources.]

Research did not clarify the *ethnicity* and *gender* of students most likely to benefit from CRE. Most of the available studies have involved Anglo middle-class youth or did not adequately report the demographic data for their programs. To date, researchers have failed to describe student participants in enough detail to make a conclusion as to whether students with learning difficulties will benefit from CRE (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007).

Results of a qualitative study by Sellman (2011) suggested that in the case of peer mediation, schools must be prepared for the shift in power from adult arbitrators to youth mediators.

Those schools where peer mediation has been both successful and sustained for several years are underpinned by consistent principles of power and control, as embodied by communicational practices, between management strategies used by adults and the philosophy underpinning mediation. It would appear then that a key feature of pupil empowerment may not be schools with pupil empowerment initiatives but rather schools that create the conditions in which pupil empowerment initiatives thrive. (p. 58)

When to Consider Introducing Conflict Resolution

As indicated above, CRE is most likely to suit *low-risk* forms of interpersonal conflict, exhibited by students aged 10 to 18 years who have the language skills and emotional self-regulation to benefit from peer-mediation sessions, direct skills instruction, or embedded curriculum exercises.

Guidelines for Implementing Conflict Resolution

To implement CRE effectively, it should be in a school that has (a) adequate resources for professional development, (b) the capacity to monitor the program effectively to be sure it is implemented systematically, (c) between two and 15 hours of time available for student participation, and (d) an existing schoolwide system of positive behavioral intervention and supports.

Systematic implementation supported by comprehensive training and a manual that participants can use later is crucial. As Garrard and Lipsey (2007) explained, “How *well* a CRE is administered is more important than *what* is implemented . . .”(p. 28). The three models require different and precise implementation. Readers will find additional information in the references and website links for peer mediation, curriculum embedded CRE, and direct instruction.

When Conflict Resolution May Not Work

Before introducing a CRE program, it is important to consider the readiness of the *entire school* for such an undertaking. After all, CRE has five components that must be addressed. Here are some problems commonly seen in failed attempts to implement CRE and some caveats about its use:

- CRE is not designed as a crisis intervention for students who are highly upset or out of control and who cannot take part in a rational problem-solving session.
- CRE is not designed to tackle high-risk acts of aggression, such as physical bullying or other forms of aggression. Such behaviors require a more intensive and sustained intervention directed by trained adults (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).
- CRE is not simply a collection of activities, discussions, or assemblies about the value of getting along with others. One-time attempts to teach or model conflict resolution are not effective, because the effectiveness of CRE is in the specific skill instruction, modeling and practice----comparable to how students learn any complex academic skill.
- Indirect modeling approaches such as testimonials and readings *without* specific skills instruction and practice are not considered true CRE and may fail.
- CRE is unlikely to succeed in school environments where adults do not model effective conflict resolution themselves.
- Research indicates younger children do not benefit from CRE as much as older students do.
- CRE alone does not resolve systematic misbehavior; instead, schools need to use CRE as a complement to a school-wide program of positive behavioral supports and interventions.

References

- Garrard, W., & Lipsey, M. (2007). Conflict resolution education and antisocial behavior in U.S. schools: A meta-analysis. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 25(1), 9.
- Gerber, S., & Terry-Day, B. (1999). Does peer mediation really work? *Professional School Counseling*, 2(3), 169–171.
- Kerr, M.M., & Nelson, C.M. (2010). *Strategies for addressing behavior problems in the classroom* (6th ed.). Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.

Powell, K. E., Muir-McClain, L., & Halasyamani, L. (1995). A review of selected school-based conflict resolution and peer mediation projects. *The Journal of School Health*, 65(10), 426-431.

Sellman, E. (2011). Peer mediation services for conflict resolution in schools: What transformations in activity characterise successful implementation? *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 45-60. doi:10.1080/01411920903419992

Website Links

HighScope Educational Research Foundation's Conflict Resolution for Preschoolers, offering children's books, DVDs, and instructional materials:
<http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=284>

Skiba, R. (2000). *Creating a positive climate: Violence Prevention and Conflict Resolution Curricula*. Indiana University: Safe and Responsive Schools Project. Retrieved January 2012 <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ViolencePrevention.pdf>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidenced-based Programs and Practice, Conflict Resolution Programs:
<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/SearchResultsNew.aspx?s=b&q=conflict%20resolution>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidenced-based Programs and Practice, Peer Mediation Programs:
<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/SearchResultsNew.aspx?s=b&q=peer%20mediation>

Teaching Tolerance, a Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Conflict Resolution and Peace: An instructional unit using “quotes from famous individuals to facilitate student reflection on the importance of conflict resolution.”
<http://www.tolerance.org/activity/conflict-resolution-and-peace>
