



## Conflict Resolution Programs in the Schools

Nadine E. Garner, Ed.D.

There is no doubt of the real need for comprehensive conflict resolution programs in the schools. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stated that violence in the nation has reached epidemic proportions and that all students from preschool through twelfth grade should be involved in a conflict resolution program. The summary of the position statement on conflict resolution by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2006, para 1) declared, "A comprehensive conflict-resolution program promotes a safe school environment that permits optimal personal growth and learning. Through participation in a comprehensive conflict-resolution program, students learn skills that maximize their potential for reaching personal goals and success in school."

The ability to effectively and peacefully handle conflict is not necessarily intuitive; rather, it is a learned skill. Johnson and Johnson (1991, p. 3), echoed these sentiments when, after over 30 years of research, they stated that "most students simply do not know how to manage their conflicts constructively." They found that students struggled with issues of verbal harassment, verbal arguments, rumors, gossip, and dating or relationship issues.

### Conflict Resolution Programs

Conflict resolution programs have various names, including Conflict Resolution Education (CRE), Peace Education, Peacemaking, Violence Prevention, or Violence Reduction. Conflict resolution models have common goals because they seek to create opportunities for students and other members of the school community to: recognize that conflict is a natural part of life and that it can be resolved peacefully, develop awareness of their own unique responses to conflict and to understand the diversity with which others respond, learn and practice the principles of conflict resolution and the skills of peaceful problem-solving processes, empower themselves to be individually and cooperatively responsible for resolving conflicts peacefully, and integrate this responsibility in their daily lives.

An authentic conflict resolution program contains two key elements: 1) the *principles* of conflict resolution (separate the people from the problem; focus on interests, not positions; invent options for mutual gain; and use objective criteria as the basis of decision-making); and 2) a *problem-solving process* (negotiation, mediation, or consensus decision-making; Crawford & Bodine, 1997). These two components are common factors in the following four approaches to conflict resolution currently used in the schools:

1. *Process Curriculum* - a specific time (e.g., separate course, distinct curriculum, daily lesson plan) is dedicated to teaching conflict resolution.

2. *Mediation Program* - adults and/or students who are trained in conflict resolution principles and the problem-solving process of mediation act as neutral third-party facilitators to help disputants reach a resolution.

3. *Peaceable Classroom* - conflict resolution is integrated into the core curriculum and classroom management. Peaceable classrooms form the foundation for the peaceable school.

4. *Peaceable School* - all members of the school community (teachers, staff, students, administrators, and parents) receive training in conflict resolution (Crawford & Bodine, 1997).

### The Professional School Counselor's Role

Nationwide, the number of school-based conflict resolution programs has skyrocketed from about 50 programs in 1984 to over 6,000 programs involving over 300,000 students in 1995 (Girard & Koch, 1996). Today, these programs have been implemented in the majority of schools. Professional school counselors often take a leading role in the implementation of these programs.

ASCA (2006) recommends the professional school counselor assume the leading role in the following components of school-wide, comprehensive conflict-resolution programs: design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Further, ASCA recommends that professional school counselors include the following elements in such programs: prevention services, training, education in recognition of early warning signs, intervention services, crisis response and follow-up, community involvement, peer mediation programs, and evaluation of program effectiveness.

Lindsay (1998) suggests that the elements of high-quality conflict resolution programs include recognition that school programs alone are no panacea, given the influence of families and communities on students. Programs in the schools should be part of a larger strategy that includes addressing conflict resolution in families and in the community. Sandy (2001) reports that conflict resolution programs can positively affect the school and classroom climate most strongly when there is an involvement of the total school community.

### Strategies for Implementing a Conflict Resolution Program

Due to the multidimensional nature of conflict resolution programs, the prospect of implementing a comprehensive conflict resolution program can appear to be an overwhelming task for professional school counselors. A more manageable approach to developing a comprehensive conflict resolution program is to plan for its development by using both long-range and immediate strategies.

### *Long-Range Strategies*

*It takes a village.* Research indicates that the most successful conflict resolution programs are ones in which the whole school community is both an active participant in the process of training, practice, and evaluation and links with mediation agencies to develop training programs for the school community.

*Conflict resolution committee.* Instead of handling such a large task alone, professional school counselors may organize a conflict resolution committee to plan and implement the long-range conflict resolution program goals for the school. Membership on this committee builds a foundation of supporters and should include professional school counselors, teachers, students, administrators, parents, and community members. The conflict resolution program should be seen as a shared opportunity. By involving members from all segments of the school community, the professional school counselor is not viewed as the sole proponent of the conflict resolution program.

*Exploration of available curricula.* There are numerous programs available designed specifically for elementary, middle, or high school levels. Many programs offer comprehensive curricula complete with lesson plans, training materials, reproducible handouts, transparency masters, videos, instructor's guides, and evaluation tools. Some programs are tailored to specific areas of conflict resolution such as bullying and relational aggression.

### *Immediate Strategies*

*Small changes lead to larger changes.* Look for opportunities to integrate concepts that focus on conflict resolution into your existing work with students. When consulting with teachers, ask them what small steps they would be willing to take now to infuse conflict resolution concepts into their existing curriculum. In so doing, when it is time to implement a comprehensive curriculum, there will already be a core group of people who are taking proactive steps.

*A multiple intelligences approach to conflict resolution.* Garner (1996) introduced a training program for counselors to use with students entitled, "A Multiple Intelligences Approach to Conflict Resolution." Using Howard Gardner's (1983, 1999) theory of multiple intelligences to draw out students' differing learning styles, the program encourages students to develop an increased awareness of how they use the various intelligences to think about and deal with conflict and conflict resolution. The program teaches students about the multiple intelligences, presents activities that need one or more of the intelligences to be activated in order to complete them, and asks students to reflect on which intelligences and activities

are strengths for them. Armstrong (1993), one of the pioneering authors to apply the use of multiple intelligences to educational settings, supports the use of the intelligences as an effective way to teach the most students through a variety of learning pathways.

### **Summary/Conclusion**

Conflict resolution programs encourage the development of useful skills for resolving conflict peacefully that can be applied across the lifespan. When implemented comprehensively, such programs promote a positive school climate. There are a variety of approaches from which to choose. The most effective program is a comprehensive one that strives to train and support all members of the school community. A conflict resolution program is not an instant solution – it is a long-term commitment requiring patience, training, and support at all levels of the school community, and ongoing evaluation to tailor the program to the needs of the school.

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*Nadine E. Garner, Ed.D., LPC, is the Director of the School Counseling Graduate Program and an associate professor in the Psychology Department at Millersville University of Pennsylvania.*

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