

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL-BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROGRAMS

According to several recent studies, the most effective school-based conflict resolution programs are “comprehensive” in that they include multiple program components. The recommended components of comprehensive programs include (1) Curriculum, (2) Peer Mediation, (3) Staff Development, (4) Parent/Community Initiatives, (4) Schoolwide Reinforcement and Behavior Management Systems, and (5) Evaluation. These multiple-component comprehensive programs may also be called “schoolwide programs” or “peaceable schools programs.” (See *References* section of this document for research citations.)

Schools often begin by instituting one component then building other components around it to establish a comprehensive program. In some schools, conflict resolution is integrated into the schoolwide instructional and behavior management systems; in others, the conflict resolution strategies are presented as a separate program, with specialized curriculum and activities. There are numerous opportunities for including conflict resolution program components in schools, including integration through the academic or the elective curriculum, citizenship and law studies, peer education classes, educational reform efforts, multicultural education, school safety and violence prevention efforts, anger management programs, classroom management strategies, schoolwide discipline policies and procedures, and cooperative learning and critical thinking strategies. The following are brief descriptions of the components of a comprehensive school-based conflict resolution program.

Curriculum

The curriculum component of the conflict resolution program provides the foundation for creating a peaceful and safe school environment and ensures that all students gain the skills and knowledge to respond constructively to conflict. Ideally, all students in the school learn the skills necessary to resolve conflict peacefully. For example, some programs require the curriculum be fully implemented for at least a year before other program components are included.

The conflict resolution curriculum may be purchased as a whole, developed locally, or adapted from a variety of sources to meet local needs. The curriculum should provide research-based, developmentally appropriate materials and activities that:

- Present concrete strategies for dealing with conflict in a positive manner
- Provide lessons with a variety of activities, including real-life scenarios for role play, interviews, group dialogue, brainstorming, and other experiential learning strategies requiring student participation and interaction
- Include structured, specific instruction and practice regarding the problem-solving skills of negotiation, mediation and consensus decision making
- Define conflict and provide information about how conflicts arise from a clash of needs, drives, wishes or demands
- Depict conflict itself as neither positive nor negative, and explain conflict as a normal part of life
- Teach that thoughtful resolution of conflicts can be achieved and win-win solutions can be reached
- Create understanding of common values, beliefs, and attitudes including nonviolence, compassion, empathy, fairness, trust, justice, respect for self and others, and appreciation of diversity
- Provide opportunities to practice empathizing, self-evaluating, reviewing personal biases and suspending judgment
- Provide opportunities to practice communicating emotions effectively, expressing emotions in non-aggressive, non-inflammatory ways, and exercising self-control
- Provide opportunities to practice active listening skills, effective speaking skills and using neutral, less emotional terms to facilitate negotiation
- Allow for creativity and innovation in solving problems and making decisions
- Help develop critical thinking skills by providing opportunities to recognize accepted criteria for behavior and apply established criteria as the basis for choosing options and planning future behaviors
- Address the basic underlying concepts of conflict resolution, including separating the people from the problem; focusing on interests, not positions; creating options so everyone wins; and using accepted fair standards and fair procedures

Peer Mediation

The peer mediation component of the comprehensive conflict resolution program involves selected students who are trained in the basic underlying concepts of conflict resolution and the steps of the mediation process. Peer mediation programs are among the most widely implemented conflict resolution program components for grades K through 12. The comprehensive conflict resolution program utilizes the peer mediation approach to intervene in disputes and teaches students how to solve their own disagreements. Students working in peer mediator teams handle common student-student disputes such as rumors, damaged friendships, misunderstandings, arguments, fights, bullying and disputes over personal property. Student mediators do not handle conflicts involving drugs, weapons, abuse or other illegal activity.

The student mediators may be selected in a number of ways. Some schools offer a process through which interested students may apply to become mediators, reserving a few spaces for students appointed by faculty and staff. Other school programs survey the students, asking for nominations of students who are trustworthy and who communicate well with their peers. From the survey results, selected students are invited to serve as mediators.

Balancing the peer mediation team in terms of gender, race and student group identity is important to ensure all students view the mediation team as accessible and to provide the broadest possible mix of perspectives. The most popular and successful students are not the only appropriate choices for peer mediators. When grouped with positive peer leaders, students seen as negative leaders, bullies or troublemakers can become good peer mediators. When given the responsibility and treated as trustworthy to perform within the system, these students often rise to the occasion.

Regardless of the approach to selection, all peer mediators receive training and ongoing refresher sessions conducted by professional mediation trainers and/or trained school staff members. Peer mediation training is tailored to the time restraints of the school and mediation team, the resources available and the developmental level of the students. Peer mediation programs require 12 to 20 hours of training for the student mediators, with periodic follow-up sessions to refine necessary skills. An effective training model for peer mediators will include instruction and practice in:

- effective communication
- maintaining confidentiality
- remaining non-judgmental
- active listening skills, accurately restating and clarifying what is said

- asking neutral questions, selecting neutral language
- detecting the underlying cause of a conflict
- techniques for defusing anger
- techniques for developing empathy between disputants
- using self-control to remain neutral
- basic underlying concepts and assumptions of conflict resolution
- specific steps and procedures for conducting the mediation process

Depending upon program design, age and skills of the students, the physical plant of the school and other local factors, mediations may be scheduled and conducted at a designated location on campus or they may take place when and where the dispute arises, such as on the playground or in the lunchroom. In addition, adults may refer students to mediation or the disputants themselves may seek it. For all mediations, confidentiality is required. Most mediations are conducted by teams of two or three — using a single mediator is not recommended.

Professional Development

Each component of the comprehensive conflict resolution program requires a different level of commitment, training and participation for the various stakeholders, including policy makers, teachers, counselors, administrators and other staff. For example, integrating conflict resolution into the existing curriculum demands understanding of conflict and conflict resolution approaches. Whether the curriculum is presented as part of regular instruction or as a separate study, the teachers and staff involved must receive sufficient training and practice to internalize the concepts and master the skills of conflict resolution.

In the same way, implementation of a peer mediation component requires training for the staff member(s) who will serve as Program Coordinator(s) as well as an introductory presentation and ongoing communication with all school staff. Including the entire school staff — the cook, custodian, playground supervisor, secretary, as well as counselor, nurse, administrators and teachers — promotes schoolwide acceptance and utilization of conflict resolution concepts and skills.

Program implementation should begin with a staff development plan including strategies and ongoing schedules for (1) overview presentations to board members, administrators, teachers and other staff, (2) schoolwide staff development so adults can begin to use conflict resolution

skills and model them for students, and (3) continuing instruction and support for those directly involved with coordination and delivery of the curriculum, the peer mediation, parent/community initiatives, schoolwide behavior management systems and evaluation components.

The developers of many comprehensive programs provide 10- to 25-hour introductory courses for teachers and other staff. The introduction includes theory and strategies that provide the foundation for conflict resolution, multicultural approaches, anger management techniques and basic negotiation skills. Introductory courses prepare school personnel, from administrators to teachers to support staff, to serve as role models in resolving conflict and to teach the skills as part of classroom instruction and as part of campus life. The introductory courses also provide assistance for integrating conflict resolution into the academic curriculum and provide practice in teaching strategies such as cooperative learning groups, role-playing, interviewing and brainstorming. Some schools, especially at the secondary level, launched their programs by providing introductory and intensive follow-up staff development for a core group of interested staff members, and later expanded the staff development offerings when the program effectiveness became apparent and general staff interest increased.

Parent/Community Initiatives

The longevity and impact of school-based conflict resolution programs increase substantially when community and family members are included. Extending the conflict resolution program into the family and community allows students to apply the principles and skills of peaceful conflict resolution in a variety of settings and reinforces those principles and skills as part of everyday life. Comprehensive programs provide training and materials so families can practice and reinforce conflict resolution at home and may offer parents opportunities to participate as negotiators, peer mediation facilitators or classroom/school resources.

Many programs offer 10 to 20 hours of training for families to learn the skills and principles of conflict resolution so they and their children can peacefully resolve disputes at home. In some programs conflict resolution is taken to parents through workshops provided at the school or at sites in the community. These approaches reinforce the skills children are learning and practicing at school and build leadership among parents and children. Parent participants may become trainers of other parents by receiving an extended training program.

Because of their interest in and commitment to violence prevention and conflict resolution, local community-based groups are positive additions to the planning and implementation process for school-based programs. Community mobilization can be promoted through the involvement of

parents, police, the business community, churches, community coalitions, local government agencies and other public and private agencies. Local citizenship and law-related organizations may offer assistance in teaching negotiation skills and extending the school-based conflict resolution strategies into the neighborhood and community. Local colleges and universities also may be valuable resources for school-based programs. For example, many schools have effectively used college interns to assist with training or ongoing program coordination.

In some cases, the community brings the conflict resolution process to the schools. Community programs are aimed at providing youth with conflict resolution training through youth clubs, churches, court referral services and other organizations and often serve to reinforce school-based programs. Programs that include families and other community members tend to have richer linkages to resources and trainers, greater impact on those involved, and stronger bases for program longevity.

Schoolwide Reinforcement and Behavior Management Systems

Implementation of a truly comprehensive school-based program requires schoolwide reinforcement of conflict resolution theory and practice and changes in the behavior management systems of the school. Because effective conflict resolution calls for the absence of coercion and the use of cooperative approaches rather than competition, many traditional academic and disciplinary policies contradict peaceful conflict resolution. As the conflict resolution program develops, the school community will need to address specific elements of policies and procedures and alter them to support the use of conflict resolution theory and skills.

Often school behavior management systems are based on punishment rather than self-discipline. Implementing conflict resolution strategies encourages people to talk about their interests and needs and to work collaboratively to find solutions. This shift to conflict resolution concepts supports student compliance without external coercion and promotes the development of disciplined individuals who are internally motivated to comply with behavior expectations.

Transforming district and school discipline policies to reflect conflict resolution theory allows educators to model an orderly, productive system accomplished through cooperation, and the discipline system itself becomes an integral part of the educational program. The transformation to a peaceful school takes place in stages, with elements of systemic change occurring as the program components are implemented and as adults and students incorporate conflict resolution practices into their daily interactions. At each stage of program implementation, school policies and behavior management systems should be reviewed and altered as necessary. For example,

discipline referral policies can be revised to include the peer mediation team, thus reducing the number of incidents requiring intervention by teachers, counselors or administrators. Teachers involved in the program may change their classroom management systems to reflect conflict resolution concepts and skills, and may influence others to do the same. Schools may implement additional strategies, such as anger management programs, and devise alternatives to suspension as part of the peaceable schools approach. In some schools, the conflict resolution skills, knowledge and behaviors have been incorporated into the report card, providing schoolwide reinforcement for mastery and use of conflict resolution concepts and linking the program to success at school. Many program developers offer technical assistance and ongoing consultation to help garner the support of governing boards, administrators, staff and the community, to develop schoolwide reinforcement of the program, and to institute behavior management systems that reflect conflict resolution program philosophy.

Evaluation

Evaluation is necessary for the successful implementation and continuation of any school-based program and takes place on numerous levels. The evaluation process begins with a needs assessment conducted *before* the program design is complete and continues throughout program implementation and institutionalization. The evaluation process provides a picture of the present state of the school, indicates successful strategies and areas for improvement and provides assessment of the effectiveness of the program components. The evaluation plan is the means through which the program can be continuously improved. (Sample questionnaires designed for students, staff and parents can be found in *Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action*, California Department of Education and the Office of the Attorney General. See the *Resources* section of this document for ordering information.)

The evaluation provides information for:

- identifying the real issues and distinguishing their relative importance
- identifying existing assets as well as program needs
- establishing the starting point, a “baseline” to compare with data gathered later
- communicating the issues and needs to staff, students, families, community, and administration
- creating focus on the important issues, avoiding the potential for splinter groups
- determining if school violence is decreasing

- documenting which strategies are effective, which need revision
- creating a common language and factual base to publicize program effectiveness

A well prepared and thoroughly implemented evaluation plan can serve to bring school staff and community together, united in a common purpose. The evaluation plan should include assessment strategies for all program components as well as ongoing assessment of school climate and participant responses to the program. The evaluation process is discussed in more detail in the *Evaluation* section of this document.