

### **Three Approaches to Dealing with Violence in Schools**

#### Crisis Management: What Most Schools Today Use

This fix is generally a short-term fix as there is nothing really getting at the root causes of the violence. School officials would constantly supervise students and mentally label all of them potential threats (Wolfe, 1995). Schools may use metal detectors to catch students with dangerous objects, have hot lines for help, and higher penalties for breaking school policy and civil laws (Wolfe, 1995). This approach operates both for preventative measures and cleanup after a conflict occurs (Wolfe, 1995). On the surface this approach works well, and can go to some extent in conjunction with the other three, but ignores the root causes of the conflict.

#### Integrating Conflict Resolution Training into the Curriculum

Teaching excellent social skills and imparting successful team building/group work skills are important to creating an environment for constructive conflict management (Stevahn, 2004). When implementing such a program a school will effectively be training the entire student body in conflict management (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996). The use of materials that abstain from having conflict in them, like those from the social sciences, will aid in creating classroom conditions that are conducive to conflict management (Stevahn, 2004).

Teachers must also help students define conflicts and teach students how to identify concrete examples that exist in curriculum; Practicing conflict resolution by

applying integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures to resolve the curricular-embedded conflicts; Processing the effectiveness of each practice episode to plan for the future refinement; and applying the procedures and skills to constructively resolve actual conflicts that occur in classrooms and schools (Stevahn, 2004). Classrooms and teachers help conduct relationships in small classrooms groups that can help accomplish knowledge, ideas, resource, and skills to complete tasks that are given (Stevahn, 2004). These cooperative conditions are necessary to any environment where constructive conflict resolution can occur (Stevahn, 2004).

There is a six-step integrative negotiation procedure that has been found to be the best procedure for this type of conflict management: 1. State what you want; 2. Express how you feel; 3. Give three reasons that understand your wants and feelings; 4. Communicate your understanding of the other person's wants, feelings, and reasoning; 5. Three plans or solutions to resolve the conflict; 6. Agreement with shaking hands to the solution (Stevahn, 2004).

In conflict that is in schools there are four steps to help diminish and end it: 1. End hostility between disputants-which often involve finding teachers, administrator or other adults supervisors to intervene; 2. Ensure commitment to the mediation process, which involves getting disputants to voluntarily participate in mediation as well as adhere to a set of ground rules; 3. Facilitate constructive negotiations, which involves leading the disputants through the six step integrative negotiation procedures; 4. Formalize the agreement, which involves writing and having disputants sign a new contract that specifies the resolution (Stevahn, 2004).

Where in the curriculum might such a education fall? The English curriculum is one option. Think of examining a text in a book by talking about it, listening to other, reading, writing and reviewing it to make sure you understand it (Wolfe, 1995). But other course areas, or even all of them combined, is also a viable option.

#### Peer Mediation: The Approach we are advocating for

Peer mediation is a form of conflict resolution that will empower the students to handle conflict resolution themselves; hence it is a long-term fix for school violence (Wolfe, 1995). The basic steps for a mediations session are: 1. The mediator(s) explain the ground rules on what each involved party (mediators plus the disputants) can and cannot do; 2. Each disputant tells their side of what happened without interruption; 3. The mediator(s) identify the issue and facts by summarizing each disputants' story and making sure everyone is on the same page; 4. The mediator(s) will help the disputants find possible solutions; 5. When a solution is found that is agreeable to all parties a document is written and signed that states the solution and what is to happen if it is not followed (Wolfe, 1995).

Only a small number of students would be trained in conflict resolution, so these programs are categorized as cadre (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996). A program coordinator would be selected, staff or student, to do the administrative management of the program (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). The students involved as mediators will be gaining skills that they will likely find applicable outside of school as well (Johnson D. W., Johnson, Dudley, Ward, & Magnuson, 1995).

**Criticism of Peer Mediation**

In large part it is unknown if peer mediation programs are successful or effective . Conflicts occur frequently in schools, and many untrained students use similar conflict management strategies. There are those who say that leaving schools to use the existing, short-term, fixes is good enough. Why implement something that is vastly different from the norm of today when both methods lead to the same outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996)? But they aren't the same; peer mediation programs are often promoted as a way of reducing violence in schools. Further, peer mediation has been proven to reduce dropout and suspension rates (Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards, & Hetherington, 2002).

Another criticism is that to manage conflicts constructively you must understand them well (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996). This isn't something that schools have time for when their prime objective is teaching curricular material. Maybe this is one criticism that would value the second approach discussed above over peer mediation.

Most critics of peer mediation see schools as representative of our crime-crazy society . But schools are far more like safe havens, as is in truth is most of our society (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996). Likewise critics will view conflict in a competitive rather than cooperative context. The

former is what most schools are dominated by, and communication is avoided or misunderstood. The latter states that resolution seeks to restore relationships, have open and honest communication, and accurate perceptions of the others whom you also trust (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996).

Some criticisms of peer mediation come out of the reality that some discussion on the topic oversimplifies the mediator's role. Likewise, studies of peer mediations haven't seen massive changes in the school climate with program implementation. But implementation of such programs does increase psychological health, self-esteem, self-regulation, and resilience in students and reduces the drop-out and suspension rates. Peer mediation programs have advanced significantly over the past decade (Johnson & Johnson, Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research, 1996).

## References

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