

Communication Skills for the Prevention of Violence

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Having the skills to deal with conflict is important nowadays because conflicts are a part of everyday life. Conflicts can be as simple as a misunderstanding between friends and as complex as domestic violence. Most conflicts can be addressed as they arise before they escalate into something more complicated and turn violent. Unfortunately, however, most young people and adults lack the necessary skills to resolve conflicts constructively.

For a long time, schools have helped children learn how to socialize and develop the attitudes they need to be adult citizens. This is why schools today should concentrate their efforts on preparing young people and adults for a non-violent lifestyle within a pluralistic framework.

Even though conflict resolution training and educating people to live together in harmony (basically the same thing) have become increasingly popular and are seen as necessary and worthwhile at all levels of education, daily life shows us that they have not really produced changes in attitudes and behaviors in the long run, or even in the short run. Why?

If we want our conflict resolution training programs to work and to significantly change the way students face their responsibilities, relationships and conflicts in everyday life, we have to change schools as institutions to reflect the principles and values that serve as the foundation of these programs. This means a systemic change in schools, not just a curricular modification. Barriers to responsible behavior permeate the entire school including classrooms. Attempts to change teaching methods must be accompanied by systemic changes, which is the only way to guarantee success. If this is not done, it will be difficult to obtain the desired results.

We can do all of these things by using an approach we call the Whole School Approach (WSA) (Alzate, 1998, 1999, 2000) which entails simultaneously implementing conflict resolution curricula, programs for peer mediation, changes in the teacher/learner relationship and intervening in the school environment. There must also be full participation by all of the protagonists in the process including students, teachers, administrators and parents.

FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THIS APPROACH

Whole or systemic programs share two main characteristics:

- 1) The goal of the curriculum is to have students learn and better understand conflict theory and techniques for dealing with conflict.

- 2) The experiential approach allows students to better solve their own disputes by putting what they learn into practice.

We distinguish between two types of programs: those that teach conflict resolution (either through independent curricula or the integration of concepts into other subjects) and what some call dispute resolution, which is basically peer mediation.

A **CONFLICT RESOLUTION** program should address two main issues: “On the one hand, it should provide all participants with a theoretical understanding of conflict and of the procedures that can be used to resolve conflictive situations, and on the other, practical experience to make them flexible, balanced and effective adults” (Alzate, 1998). Even though we believe that the curriculum covers both the theoretical and practical nature of conflicts and their resolution, most authors agree that negotiation and peer mediation are two of the most important procedures that should be integrated into the experiential part of any program.

In general, we believe that curricular and peer mediation programs are closely related and that combining them is one of the best ways to help students productively solve their interpersonal problems.

TYPES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROGRAMS

CURRICULAR PROGRAMS

We could define curricular programs as a set of instructional activities whose goals and objectives are designed to produce changes in the understanding, attitudes and behavior of students, specifically their understanding of conflict, their attitudes toward their resolution, and the skill to use communication and problem solving skills constructively to arrive at peaceful, fair and cooperative solutions (results) (Sweeney and Carruthers, 1996). A conflict resolution curriculum should cover both theoretical and practical issues.

PEER MEDIATION PROGRAMS

Peer mediation programs can be defined as those that use the services of an impartial, uninvolved student (mediator) to help the students involved in the conflict reach a peaceful, fair and cooperative solution through their own efforts.

THE PEACEFUL CLASSROOM APPROACH. THE WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH.

The peaceable school approach (Kreidler 1984, 1990) is a classroom method that integrates conflict resolution (skills, principles, some conflict resolution problem solving techniques) into the regular academic curriculum and classroom management strategies. It also includes a pedagogical methodology based on cooperative learning and academic controversy (Johnson and Johnson 1992, 1995). Generally, peaceful classrooms are

started by individual teachers, who lay the building blocks of a peaceable school one by one (Bondine and Crawford, 1998).

As regards integration into the curriculum, first the necessary skills and concepts related to constructively finding solutions must be taught, and the principles of conflict resolution must be infused into academic subjects. We must emphasize the importance of infusion as compared to integration when we are talking about conflict resolution (Compton, 1998). The term integration is used to describe strategies that relate different academic disciplines (and their content) to the goal of helping students make connections between them. Infusion is an umbrella term that is used to describe learning and modeling concepts and conflict resolution skills in the classroom and throughout the school.

Teachers that integrate the curriculum contribute to the creation of a peaceful classroom and create environments that support conflict resolution and pro-social behavior. Kreidler (1990) defines a peaceful classroom as one that emerges from the synergy of five principles:

Cooperation: students learn by working together to trust, help and share with one another.

Communication: students learn to observe with care, communicate with precision and listen with sensitivity.

Tolerance: students learn to respect and appreciate the differences between people and understand prejudice and how it works.

Positive emotional expression: Students learn to express their feelings, especially ones of rage, anger and frustration, and channel them in non-aggressive and non-destructive ways, thereby learning self-control.

Conflict resolution: Students learn the skills they need to respond creatively to the conflicts they encounter in the context of a humanitarian and supportive community.

We call this type of approach a whole school program.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

There are different ways to begin. Even an easy approach which can be expanded later on is good if there is a commitment to making the program viable. For example, a teacher can train his or her students in conflict resolution, or a group of teachers can pool their resources and offer a conflict resolution program to a larger group of students. Another possibility is for a group of teachers, supported by the rest of the faculty who at least recognize the value of this type of program, to institute a peer mediation program throughout the school, or all faculty members can agree to implement some conflict resolution or resolution techniques in class such as negotiation, consensual decision-making, etc.

making, class assemblies, and so on. One final idea might be for the entire school community to commit to the goal of developing a peaceable school within a certain timeframe.

WHAT IS OUR WORKSHOP ALL ABOUT?

In this workshop we are going to touch on two of the main elements of training in a conflict resolution program since we do not have sufficient time to fully explain all of them. The elements we will discuss have to do with communication since we believe that it is precisely the lack of communication skills that generates many conflicts which are not resolved peaceably.

This will be an interactive workshop in which learning will take place through active experimentation, both at the individual and group levels. Activities will include debate, role playing and demonstrations. Experiential learning will be the main focus of the workshop and all attendees are asked to participate actively.

We will address the following points:

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

1. Effective communication is essential for conflict management.
2. Communication is a complex process which requires each and every participant to effectively send and receive messages.
3. The final outcome of communication is the creation of shared meaning.
4. The effectiveness of communication is affected by the similarities and differences of the participants and their
 - a. Values
 - b. Perceptions
 - c. Assumptions
 - d. Communicative style
5. Communication has a cultural base.
6. Given the increasing cultural, racial, ethnic, religious and ideological diversity in the world today, most of our communication is through culture.
7. Culture generally refers to beliefs, values and rules that affect the behavior of specific groups of people.
8. We are all the product of one culture or another.
9. The factors involved in communication help us analyze how we communicate with people from different places.
10. We all have the tendency to create and sustain stereotypes and prejudices.
11. Effective intercultural communication implies:
 - a. Appreciation of our own cultural values.
 - b. Active awareness of our own stereotypes and prejudices.
 - c. The will to learn and understand the values of other cultures.
 - d. Motivation to communicate with other groups.
 - e. Awareness
 - i. Of our own habits

- ii. Of how our values-based behaviors affect people from different cultures.
 - iii. Of the differences that can exist between cultures.
 - iv. Of the dynamic nature of our own culture
- f. Practice and culture.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. Our communication skills can be improved through learning and practicing specific skills.
2. There are common barriers to effective communication.
3. The goal of effective communication is to create and understand shared meaning.
4. The techniques of active listening include: encouragement, clarification, repetition, reflecting feelings and summarizing information.
5. Speaking effectively implies clearly expressing important thoughts and feelings without judging or condemning anyone.
6. Other important skills include:
 - a. Using communication skills to lessen emotions and deescalate conflict.
 - b. Giving constructive feedback.
 - c. Understanding non-verbal cues.
 - d. Distinguishing between thoughts and feelings.
 - e. Helping others to understand your feelings.