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# PEER MEDIATION: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



NATIONAL  
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SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

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Conflict is both natural and inevitable in human interactions. However, since the late 1980s there has been a significant increase in incidents of violent conflict in schools. Many of these conflicts have had tragic consequences, and school professionals are being called upon to find effective solutions to these problems. Violent or aggressive responses can make conflict a destructive experience rather than a medium through which problems can be aired and solutions reached. Responses such as avoidance, withdrawal, and physical or verbal confrontation are not constructive and usually exacerbate conflict. Strategic communication, problem-solving strategies, and establishing climates in which differences are tolerated and respected are the most effective ways to resolve conflicts between individuals.

Experts in the area of conflict resolution agree that schools *must* purposefully teach students effective conflict resolution skills because they may not acquire such skills incidentally. Unresolved conflicts can lead to poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and other social-behavioral problems, including violence. Studies have shown that school-based conflict resolution programs, in connection with efforts to establish bully-free pro-social school climates, have assisted children in learning and implementing positive conflict resolution strategies. School-based programs may include teaching conflict resolution curricula, anger management skills, and peer mediation, or a combination of these elements.

## Peer Mediation

Peer mediation is one of the most frequently used skills-based approaches to conflict resolution in the schools. It is used primarily to resolve serious conflicts between two or more students that they cannot handle independently or to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence. Peer mediation relies on an impartial third party, the mediator, to help students in conflict use communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills to resolve their differences and to reach a mutually beneficial agreement.

**Effective peer mediation.** Peer mediation is designed to teach students to find alternative ways to resolve conflicts and to encourage them to solve their own problems constructively. When peer mediation is effective, it allows students to understand and respect different points of view, teaches problem-solving and decision making, improves communication and critical thinking skills, increases cooperation, and reduces adult intervention in student conflicts.

**Outcomes.** Peer mediation programs have been shown to consistently improve school climate, increase campus safety, reduce violence, and decrease disciplinary referrals and suspension rates in all schools irrespective of the age, background, or ability of the child or type or size of community. Students who function as peer mediators frequently serve as school leaders. They show an increased level of self-esteem, confidence, and conflict resolution skills. If used as an integral aspect of school-wide education for behavior change, peer mediation programs can build and strengthen school communities, encourage a proactive approach to problem solution, and facilitate the use of conflict resolution skills among all students.

## The Peer Mediator

**Selecting peer mediators.** A peer mediator is a student who is in the same grade or about the same age as the students who are engaged in conflict. Research has indicated that students relate better to peer than to adult mediators and are consequently empowered by their ability to solve problems without adult assistance.

The peer mediator is usually nominated by other students or teachers. The prospective mediator is then screened carefully by teachers and administrators to ensure that he or she has the prerequisite

interpersonal or perspective-taking skills to empathize with their peers and the cognitive skills to engage in effective problem solving.

**Characteristics and responsibilities.** Characteristics of effective peer mediators include sound judgment, leadership abilities, excellent communication skills, and credibility with peers, but not necessarily superior academic achievement or perfect classroom behavior.

The peer mediator's role is to facilitate the problem-solving process, rather than to render a judgment, force a solution, or otherwise influence a decision. Responsibilities of the peer mediator include monitoring the problem-solving process, remaining unbiased, listening empathically, being respectful, helping students work together to solve problems, and keeping information confidential.

Peer mediators are required to complete training in conflict resolution, mediation, and collaboration, with most experts recommending between 12 and 20 contact-hours, depending on the age of the student.

## Peer Mediation Procedures

Students may request mediation when they are involved in a dispute or may be referred by teachers, administrators, and parents; however, participation is most effective when it is voluntary. Once students agree to mediation, the peer mediator assigned to a case arranges a meeting in a neutral location. The session is usually closed to other participants although exceptions may be made in the case of very young students who may require the presence of an adult supervisor.

Peer mediation requires few materials other than a timer, flip chart, paper, and markers that can be used to track progress and write down ideas for problem solution. The following sequence of steps is most representative of peer mediation sessions.

**Open the session.** The *disputants* (the students in conflict) are seated facing each other with the peer mediator between them. Disputants are introduced to the peer mediator and to each other. The peer mediator explains the purpose of peer mediation, briefly describes the process, and then states the ground rules.

Though there are variations in ground rules, most peer mediation sessions require students to show respect to each other and the peer mediator, to be truthful, to stay calm, to listen without interruptions to the other person's point of view, and to be willing to cooperate to find a solution.

Disputants should also be reminded to focus on the conflict rather than the person and to refrain from name-calling, blaming, and finding fault. The peer mediator ensures that ground rules are discussed and understood by both disputants and then secures a commitment from both parties to follow all rules.

**Identify the problem and gather information.** The disputants are asked, one at a time, for their version of the problem. Mediators may assign both students, say, 10 minutes, during which the one disputant may speak uninterrupted while the other simply listens. Some students may need help paring away anger and resentment in order to arrive at the real source of conflict and to state the problem in simple, objective terms. For example, a disputants might be encouraged to say, "John took my English book without asking me for permission when I needed it to study for a test," rather than say, "John stole my English book ... what a jerk!"

Other information that helps provide a context for the conflict may also be solicited from the disputants. The peer mediator's role during this stage is to use effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills such as eye contact, empathy, restating, summarizing, and clarifying to obtain as much relevant information as possible.

**Focus on common interests.** The peer mediator asks questions of the disputants in an effort to determine their goals and to clarify why they want to reach those goals. Common interests are identified and used as the foundation for further discussion. For example, two students who both indicate that they want to solve the problem as quickly as possible may be more motivated to engage in peer mediation, and therefore, may be more successful at finding a solution to their problems.

**Generate options for problem solution.** The peer mediator explains that brainstorming will be used to find solutions to the problem and describes the rules for brainstorming, where the disputants are required to come up with as many solutions to the problem as possible, without judging, evaluating, or criticizing, regardless of how far-fetched or unworkable the other's ideas may seem. The focus at this stage is quantity of ideas, not quality. The peer mediator may write down ideas as they are offered and may ask questions for clarification.

**Evaluate options and choose a solution.** The disputants evaluate their list of solutions once again with the help of the peer mediator. Their task is to decide on one option that best meets both their needs or to find a compromise. The peer mediator verbally summarizes the solution and asks for feedback from the disputants about its potential for success.

**Develop an agreement and commit to it.** The disputants take turns stating what their roles and responsibilities will be in problem solution. A timeline is often identified with provisions made for systematic monitoring and evaluation of the process. The agreement is written down by the peer mediator, both disputants sign the document, and the peer mediator

witnesses and signs it as well. The mediator congratulates the disputants on a successful session and encourages them to shake hands to seal the deal. Once implementation of the agreement is underway, the disputants are free to seek additional mediation if desired. Changes in the original agreement must be accepted and agreed to in writing by both disputants and the peer mediator.

## Establishing Peer Mediation Programs in Schools

Peer mediation can be a highly successful tool for conflict resolution in the schools, particularly as part of a larger effort to bring about change in student behavior. The following core components of successful conflict resolution programs are useful for educators who are interested in establishing such programs:

- Clear, specific outcomes and procedures.
- An advisory committee that includes school professionals, parents, community representatives, and older students.
- Adequate funding and resources.
- Community support.
- Public relations tools such as brochures and media advertisements.
- Selection and training of program coordinators and peer mediators.
- Orientation sessions for staff and students.
- An evaluation plan that includes realistic timelines, evaluation criteria, and methods of formative and summative evaluation.

## Resources

Bickmore, K. (2001). Student conflict resolution, power “sharing” in schools, and citizenship education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 31(3), 137–162.

Bodine, R., Crawford, D., & Schrupf, F. (1994). *Creating the peaceable school: A comprehensive program for teaching conflict resolution*. Champaign, IL: Research Press. ISBN: 0878224769. (Includes program guide, student manual, and video; for grades 3–12.)

Johnson D., & Johnson, R. T. (1996). *Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in programs in elementary and secondary schools: A review of the research*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 0034-6543.)

Roerden, L.P. (2000). *Don't laugh at me: Creating a ridicule-free classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility. Available: [www.esrnational.org](http://www.esrnational.org) (For grades 6–8.)

Schrumpf, F., Crawford, D., & Usadel, H. C. (1996). *Peer mediation: Conflict resolution in schools*.

Champaign, IL: Research Press. ISBN: 0878223673. (Includes program guide student manual, and video; useful through high school.)

## Agencies Providing Consultation and Training

CHAMPS Peer Leadership Programs, 14425 N.

Scottsdale Rd., Suite 400, Scottsdale, AZ 85254.

Community Board Program, 1540 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94102;

[www.communityboards.org/schools.html](http://www.communityboards.org/schools.html)

National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1726 M Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20035; (202) 466-4764.

Oakland Mediation Center, Education Director, 2267 South Telegraph Road, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48302; (248) 338-4280; [www.mediation-omc.org](http://www.mediation-omc.org)

Peace Education Foundation, 1900 Biscayne Boulevard, Miami, FL 33132; (800) 749-8838; [www.peaceeducation.com](http://www.peaceeducation.com)

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, RCCP National Center, 70 Exchange Place, Suite 1111, New York, NY 10005; (212) 509-0022; [www.esrnational.org/about-rccp.html](http://www.esrnational.org/about-rccp.html)

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