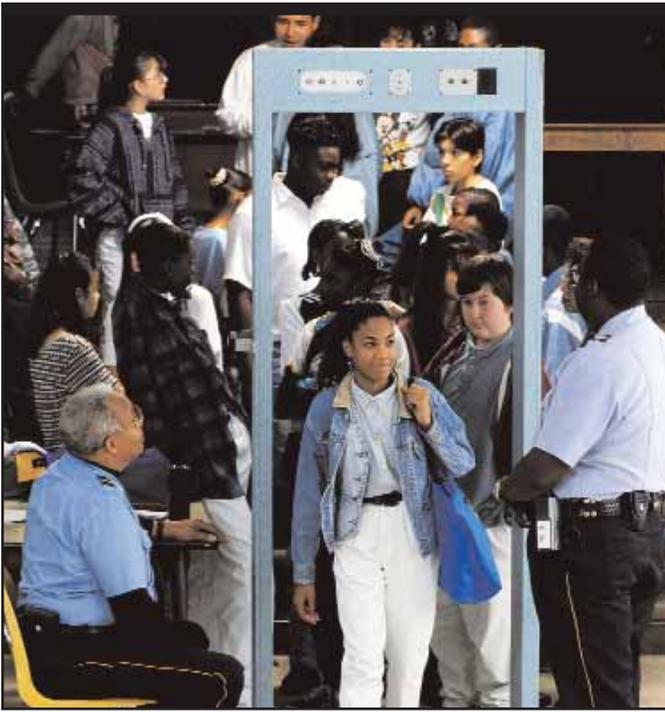


# Mediating a Better Solution

Peer mediation helps secondary school students become better problemsolvers, decisionmakers, and communicators.

By Mary M. Chittooran and Gaileen A. Hoenig

STOCK PHOTO IMAGE



**T**he *Collins English Dictionary* defines *conflict* as “a state of opposition between ideas and interests.” Although conflict is an inevitable consequence of human interaction, violent responses to conflict are neither normal nor acceptable. In recent years, an alarming number of secondary school administrators have reported using metal detectors to screen their students, confiscating weapons, or calling law enforcement to intervene in student conflicts (Robinson, 1997). This has precipitated a large-scale inquiry into how to solve the problem of violence in secondary schools. One solution is to implement conflict resolution education that teaches a set of skills that lend themselves to the nonviolent, constructive management of conflict (Gilhooley & Scheuch, 2000).

Unresolved conflicts can lead to poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, and general behavioral difficulties. However, systematic conflict resolution strategies have been shown to reduce in-school fighting, suspensions, disciplinary referrals, absenteeism, vandalism, and

bullying (Bodine, Crawford, & Schrupf, 1994; Jackson & Davis, 2001). Research has shown that the most popular approach to conflict resolution in secondary schools includes a comprehensive violence reduction program that incorporates proactive strategies, effective intervention approaches, and systematic collaboration between the schools and the communities they serve (Crawford & Bodine, 2001). The most effective approaches to conflict resolution include instruction in communication and cooperative problem-solving skills that are implemented in a climate where nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution are considered standard operating procedure. School-based programs may include a combination of conflict resolution curricula, anger management skills training, peer mediation, and the development of peaceable classrooms or schools.

## Peer Mediation

Peer mediation is based on the assumption that conflicts are simply mutual problems that can be resolved in ways

that benefit all parties. In secondary schools, peer mediation is used to help two or more students resolve serious conflicts they cannot handle independently. Peer mediation relies on an impartial third party, the peer mediator, to facilitate the problem-solving process and help students use advanced communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills to reach a mutually beneficial resolution (Crawford & Bodine, 2001). Some programs use teams of peer mediators who collaborate to facilitate the negotiation process. Disputes about such issues as jealousy, the use of personal property, bullying, rumors, fights, and misunderstandings among students lend themselves to peer mediation. Peer mediation may not, however, be appropriate in situations where the students have severe emotional problems, have already engaged in violent acts, or have had unsuccessful experiences with mediation.

Peer mediation is particularly appropriate for secondary school because at this stage in their developmental process, students typically rely on their peers for social and emotional support and welcome opportunities to function independently of their parents and teachers. In addition, secondary school students are better able to view problems from the perspective of their peers

*Mary M. Chittooran is a school psychologist on the faculty of Saint Louis University. Gaileen A. Hoenig is a special education resource teacher at North Middle School in Alton, IL. Counseling 101 is provided by the National Association of School Psychologists ([www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)).*

and can frame disputes in language that is understood by their classmates.

### Expected Outcomes

When peer mediation is employed within a larger context of nonviolent conflict resolution, it teaches secondary school students to become more effective problemsolvers, decisionmakers, and communicators. It helps them improve their perspective-taking skills, increases tolerance for alternate points of view, and teaches respect for others. It increases communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills. In addition, because peer mediation reduces adult intervention in student conflicts, it allows teachers and administrators to focus on teaching instead of discipline.

Peer mediation programs have been shown to positively affect school climate and perceptions of school safety, reduce violent conflict, and drastically limit the number of office referrals and school suspensions for misbehavior. Positive effects have been noted in urban, suburban, and rural settings, among all socioeconomic levels and ethnic groups, and in both males and females (Crawford & Bodine, 2001).

### FACTORS RELATED TO CONFLICT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- School size: Violent conflicts are more common in large schools than in mid-sized or small schools.
- Student age: Middle school students are the most likely targets of violent behavior.
- Weapons: About 10% of high school students have been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.
- Bullying: About 20%–30% of U.S. students are the instigators or targets of bullying; students between the ages of 8 and 15 identify bullying as more of a problem than other forms of violence.

Source: Juvonen, J. (2001). *School violence: Prevalence, fears, and prevention*. Retrieved December 7, 2004, from [www.rand.org/publications/IP/IP219](http://www.rand.org/publications/IP/IP219).

Finally, if peer mediation is used as a core component of schoolwide education for behavior change, it can lead to empowerment of the entire school community and the perception that nonviolent approaches to conflict are the norm, instead of the exception.

### The Peer Mediator: Selection, Characteristics, and Responsibilities

A peer mediator is a student who is about the same age or grade level as the students in conflict. Students appear to relate better to mediators who are their own age and are empowered by being able to solve problems without benefit of adult assistance (Myrick, 2002). Mediators are selected on the basis of teachers' or administrators' recommendations and are carefully screened to ensure that they have both the interpersonal and cognitive skills to facilitate the negotiation process.

Effective peer mediators must exhibit mature judgment, leadership abilities, and excellent verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Interestingly, although peer mediators enjoy high social status among their peers, they are rarely the highest achieving or best-behaved students in the school. It is important to note that the peer mediator functions primarily as a facilitator, not as a decisionmaker or a judge.

The responsibilities of the peer mediator include monitoring the problem-solving process; maintaining confidentiality; and functioning in an unbiased, empathetic, and respectful manner to help students work together to solve their problems. Most peer mediation programs require secondary-level peer mediators to complete about 20 hours of initial training in conflict resolution, mediation, negotiation, communication, and collaboration, as well as frequent refresher courses in mediation skills. Parental consent should be obtained before students sign up to be peer mediators because training and mediation can involve a substantial investment of time and effort.

### The Peer Mediation Process

Students may request mediation to help them resolve a dispute or they may be referred by school personnel or families; in either case, participants must engage in mediation voluntarily. Although some students will be resistant to this process, they might be encouraged to participate by such incentives as avoiding suspension or other disciplinary action if they agree to mediation. Other means of addressing conflict should be in place for students who refuse mediation or fail to follow through on their agreement. The resources and materials necessary for peer mediation are minimal and include a private room equipped with a small table and chairs, a timer, and writing materials.

Once students agree to mediation, the peer mediator assigned to the case arranges a meeting that is closed to observers. Mediation sessions may be held before school, after school, or during specific periods of the school day that are set aside for this purpose. The mediator records basic information about the conflict and its resolution and provides these records to the faculty coordinator who monitors the effectiveness of the process. The following sequence of steps, derived from Crawford and Bodine (2001), is most representative of peer mediation sessions; however, the process may be modified to suit a particular school or setting.

**Open the session.** The students involved in the dispute are seated facing each other with the peer mediator between them. Once introductions are made, the peer mediator discusses the purpose, process, and ground rules of peer mediation and then secures a commitment from both students to abide by the rules. Ground rules generally include showing respect for others, cooperating, being willing to listen, taking turns speaking, focusing on issues and not persons, and maintaining the confidentiality of the mediation session. Students should be made aware that a record of the mediation session will be

## CASE STUDY

As the assistant principal for the freshman class in a mid-sized urban high school, you meet with Mrs. Lombardi and Mr. Zacharias, two school counselors who sponsor the school's peer mediation program. They express concern about this year's decrease in requests for the peer mediation process. They remind you that ninth-grade students have been involved in many low-level peer conflicts and that discipline referrals are mounting. In previous years, peer mediation has been an effective, proactive intervention tool in the school.

Students who in the past were referred by teachers for mediation are currently sent to the office for disciplinary consequences. Some teachers appear unwilling to allow students to implement the conflict-reducing strategies suggested in peer mediation sessions. Several staff members have summarily refused to allow creative strategies, such as a student asking permission to step out of the classroom to regain composure when tension is mounting within a peer conflict. These staff members argue, "What if every child wanted to step out of the classroom? Then what?" When the counselors show these teachers documents that demonstrate the strategy as part of a mediated solution, they reply, "Who cares!"

### Observations

Persistent attempts to refocus attention on the effectiveness of proactive behavior management interventions can be neglected when teachers juggle competing educational initiatives and may be attracted by the lure of a quick-fix punishment approach to student conflict. School leaders themselves must manage an array of district and school initiatives. However, the most effective way to reduce school violence is to reduce the incidence of initial violent conflicts. Peer mediation is a promising approach to creating a safe school environment and those who facilitate conflict resolution programs may need the active support of school leaders to gain the cooperation of staff members.

### What to Do

School leaders who regularly focus the attention of student and staff members on violence prevention through continued training, communication, and incentives tend to have fewer disciplinary referrals than those who implement only traditional punishment strategies. Effective conflict resolution programs teach problem-solving principles and skills to all students. Systems that spotlight students who contribute to a peaceable school climate by participating in mediations, serving as peer mediators, or interacting peacefully in other ways underscore to your students and staff members the value you place on a safe school environment.

School leaders should help their peer mediation committees systematically plan for faculty meetings that at least once a semester showcase school data that track the relationships of student participation in mediation with the rates of further disciplinary actions. Committee members can share recommendations regarding the most effective timing for peer-mediation referrals within the student-conflict cycle. Periodic incentives to recognize staff members' involvement in the student referral process can be as simple as humorous awards, coupons for an extra prep time while administrators teach the class, or access to a desired parking space for a day. Showing regard for staff members who participate in proactive interventions and peaceable school efforts can serve to highlight one of your own professional values, as well as underscore a high priority school initiative.

### What to Consider

- Is your school schedule designed to allow a time when mediators, staff members, and coaches can meet? Many schools use an advisory period for mediation time.
- Are you collecting data that compare outcomes of mediated interactions with those of disciplinary referrals?
- What is the protocol for making a referral to peer mediation? Does everyone understand the process? Do you routinely orient new staff members to this program when they are hired?
- Have you been trained in the peer mediation process? Do you understand the goals of peer mediation and how they are different from disciplinary actions?
- Are your mediation coaches and those who collect data compensated in some way for their time and effort? Collecting and analyzing data, scheduling and participating in mediations, and training and informing staff takes time and energy.
- Have you connected peer mediation with other proactive behavior initiatives in your school and woven these elements into a coherent approach toward creating a peaceable school?
- Have you communicated these integrated efforts to staff members, parents, and students?

### Implementing a Plan

- Schedule a refresher training session presented by an area expert in peer mediation. Include educators from a local site where the peer mediation program is working effectively. Ask them to share specific features and outcomes of their program.
- Include peer mediation updates and discipline-related data on the agenda of monthly faculty meetings. Take a moment to acknowledge all staff members who supported mediation efforts that month.
- Consider replenishing the advisory team by requesting nominations from staff members, students, and parents. Meet with the advisory team and peer mediation trainers and coordinators to brainstorm strategies to get the program back on track. Consider further training needs, staff incentives, and data collection needs.
- Communicate any revisions in the program to staff members and seek a written commitment of cooperation. Consult individually with any staff members who are not willing to make such a commitment; consider their reservations or resistance and seek their suggestions to make the program more acceptable. Reframe suggestions and solutions in terms of peaceable school objectives.

maintained by the faculty coordinator, but will not be shared with other staff members or parents without the permission of the students, except for any exchange of information needed to implement the final solution.

**Identify the problem and gather information.** Students are each given a specified period of time to describe their perception of the problem without interruptions. The peer mediator uses such advanced communication skills as eye contact, summarization, and clarification to help students state the problem in clear, objective, and unemotional terms. Students are encouraged to view the conflict as a mutual problem and are asked to see the conflict from the perspective of the other person and to repeat, in their own words, what the other person said.

**Develop goals and focus on common interests.** The peer mediator helps students develop goals for the peer mediation session and asks questions to identify common interests that can be used as the foundation for further discussion. At this point, students are asked to integrate competing sets of interests and come up with one set of common interests. Students should develop both short- and long-term goals so they can experience success when they reach intermediate goals.

**Generate options for solving the problem.** Brainstorming techniques are used during this stage to help students come up with as many solutions to the problem as possible. The focus is on generating a number of options. Students must be firmly discouraged from judging or criticizing another's ideas, and the peer mediator may take notes and ask questions for clarification.

**Evaluate options and choose a solution.** The students systematically evaluate each option and decide on one that best meets their needs or could work with some compromise. The peer mediator verbally summarizes the plan and asks students for feedback regarding its potential for

## PEER MEDIATION RESOURCES

*We can work it out: Problem solving through mediation (2nd ed.)* S. Glickman and J. Zimmer. 1993. Washington, DC: National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law.

Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in elementary and secondary schools: A review of the research. D. Johnson and R. T. Johnson. 1996. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(4), 459–506. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED00346543)

*Don't laugh at me: Creating a ridicule-free classroom.* L. P. Roerden. 2000. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

*Peer mediation: Conflict resolution in schools.* F. Schrupf, D. Crawford, & H. Usadel. 1996. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

### Agencies that provide consultation, training, and materials for secondary schools:

Community Board Program, San Francisco, CA. Offers a secondary school curriculum for conflict resolution. Phone: 415-552-1250; E-mail: cmbrds@igc.apc.org

CRU Institute. Peer mediation program and evaluation forms for secondary schools. Web site: [www.cruinstitute.org/pdf/secondary.pdf](http://www.cruinstitute.org/pdf/secondary.pdf)

Federal Activities Addressing Violence in Schools. Lists all ongoing and completed projects that address violence around schools; updated semiannually. Phone: 888-231-6405; Web site: [www.safeyouth.org/scripts/school/index.asp](http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/school/index.asp)

Oakland Mediation Center, Bloomfield Hills, MI. Phone: 248-338-4280; Web site: [www.mediation-omc.org](http://www.mediation-omc.org)

Peace Education Foundation, Miami, FL. Phone: 800-749-8838; Web site: [www.peaceducation.com](http://www.peaceducation.com)

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, RCCP National Center, New York, NY. Phone: 212-509-0022; Web site: [www.esnational.org/about-rccp.htm/](http://www.esnational.org/about-rccp.htm/)

success. The ideal plan is fair, maximizes joint benefits, and teaches the students strategies to solve future conflicts constructively.

**Develop an agreement and commit to it.** Students develop a written agreement that includes a timeline, roles and responsibilities, and provisions for evaluating the process and is signed by all participants. Additional mediation may be sought as needed and the plan may be renegotiated; however, changes to the original agreement must be agreed to by all participants.

### Establishing Peer Mediation Programs in Schools

There are many well-established peer mediation programs that can be adapted to address individual school needs (see resources). These programs

typically include guidebooks, training materials, promotion materials, and sometimes include trainers or sponsors. Principals who are interested in establishing peer mediation programs in their schools should investigate existing programs and look for the following core components that are part of any successful program:

- A comprehensive needs assessment of school professionals, families, and community agencies.
- A network of peer mediation training organizations (e.g., the community board program in California) for programs, training, or materials.
- A peer mediation program team with a coordinator and trainers of student peer mediators.
- Individuals who have training and experience in managing conflict and who are well respected by both students

and staff members. Support services personnel, such as school psychologists and counselors, are often in ideal positions to provide leadership in peer mediation programs.

- An advisory council of parents, school professionals, students; and community members (such as law enforcement officers, after-school program directors, and youth workers). This group reviews the needs assessment, works with school staff members to identify appropriate programs, and serves as a sounding board and problem-solving resource throughout the implementation of the program.
- Training sessions and materials for program coordinators, trainers of student peer mediators, and peer mediators.
- Adequate funding and resources to build and maintain the program. Administrators may find grant sources that have pools of funding for peer mediation programs and staff training.
- School and community support that is built by including relevant groups in the creation of the program and communicating about the need for and benefits of the program.
- Public relations materials, such as flyers, advertisements, and program videos.
- Orientation sessions for staff members and students.
- Scheduled time for participants to plan, evaluate, and share the results of their work.
- An evaluation plan that includes short- and long-term behavioral goals, behavioral outcomes, timelines, evaluation criteria, and methods of formative and summative evaluation.

## Conclusion

A peer mediation program can serve as an invaluable resource for conflict resolution among secondary school students, particularly if it is part of a larger movement to establish peaceable environments where nonviolence and communication become a way of life, not an afterthought or a reaction to a crisis.

Creating a safe, stable school environment promotes higher academic achievement and well-being for all students and builds greater student connectedness and investment in the school community. These principles are emphasized in both the No Child Left Behind Act and the newly reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, not simply as a backdrop to academic goals, but as concrete, measurable objectives directly related to school accountability. Peer mediation is a field-tested, highly effective approach that can help schools meet these standards and provide outcomes that can be measured and reported as indicators of school success. A program's success, though, will depend on the principal's leadership in building initial support among staff members, students, and parents and fostering their *continued* commitment to the program. **PL**

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