

Positive School Conflict Solutions

Many students do not know how to handle common problems such as jealousy, threats, teasing, and physical aggression. These problems often lead to fights that disrupt learning and cause an unpleasant school climate. In a recent study, 73% of middle school students were unable to articulate the key components of managing conflicts and talking out problems. Teaching students keys to managing conflicts successfully can reduce violence in schools and lead to improved academic performance. School-wide conflict management education, as well as specialized help for students who repeatedly display violent behavior, are essential components of a comprehensive positive school conflict prevention program.

A comprehensive school violence prevention program was piloted at Mounds Park All Nations School in the 1998-99 school year. This program significantly reduced violence in the school. There was a 63% reduction of fights on the playground and a 42% reduction of fights on the school bus coming to school. Two of the main components that caused this shift were school-wide conflict management education and specialized help for students displaying violent behavior.

School-Wide Conflict Management Education

A school-wide conflict management education program is based on the belief that violence will reduce if students know how to manage their problems. One of the key components of the program is that all students and staff know a common language of how to manage conflicts. This common language can be taught in the classroom, outlined on posters throughout the school and reinforced by staff during conflict situations. This common language can be a point of reference that staff can use to help students with their conflicts.

According to William DeJong, a lecturer at the Harvard School of Public Health, "The best school-based violence prevention programs seek to do more than reach the individual child. They instead try to change the total school environment, to create a safe community that lives by a credo of non-violence and multicultural appreciation."

Conflict management education programs enable students to learn new skills and handle conflicts in a nonviolent way. A goal of the program is that students will listen to other points of view, express their thoughts and find a solution that works for both students. It is helpful to keep the common language simple so that it is easy for students and staff to remember. For example, the program can be based on three ways to handle a conflict. They are:

- 1) Talk it out
- 2) Ignore it
- 3) Get help

When a student is having a conflict, the staff member can ask them which one of the three ways to handle a conflict would work best in this situation. This language can also help with reflection on a conflict when it is escalated to fight.

Another important component to a conflict management education program is to teach students how to talk out conflict. This area is where middle school students consistently score the lowest. These students cannot tell how to successfully talk out conflicts. It makes sense that many conflicts would end in a fight if students lack the skills of talking out a conflict. Examples of the keys to talking out a conflict are:

- 1) Positive Attitude
- 2) Listen
- 3) Don't Yell
- 4) Be Honest
- 5) Don't Interrupt
- 6) No Name Calling
- 7) One Person Talks at a Time

Students (and adults) often break many of these rules when they are in a conflict. The most important key to talking out a conflict is having a positive attitude. Students learn how a positive self-concept, empathy and looking for the good in things all contribute to a positive attitude.

There are many elements to conflict management that can be taught. Some of the most important concepts can make a big impact on the success of managing conflicts. Examples of the some of the important concepts are:

- * win/win situations
- * simple strategies to handle conflicts
- * how people with pride and positive self-concept successfully handle conflicts
- * how to build pride and self-concept
- * empathy
- * positive attitude
- * how to recognize and manage feelings in a conflict
- * speaking clearly in a conflict situation
- * which techniques to use in different conflict situations

If you would like to see some lessons on conflict management, visit the guidance office at Falls High School

The most effective conflict management education programs contain a school-wide campaign piece. Student leadership groups that are facilitated by a staff person best lead this campaign. The staff person should allow the group to come up with ways that they could enhance the campaign. The student leadership group can publicize the campaign by

using posters, presenting assemblies, making videos, publishing a website and writing articles in the school newspaper.

As a result of recognizing the importance of directly involving youth in conflict management, many schools have implemented peer mediation programs. Peer mediators are trained to help students manage their conflicts using the language of the school-wide conflict management education programs. Mediation programs reduce the use of traditional disciplinary actions such as suspension, detention, and expulsion; encourage effective problem solving; decrease the need for teacher involvement in student conflicts; and improve school climate. The program promotes mediation, negotiation, or other non-litigating methods as strategies to settle unresolved confrontations and fighting.

Parents can also help students improve their conflict management skills. The student leadership team sends home letters that outline the key concepts of the program. The common language taught in the program can be reinforced at home. Parents should be invited to any assemblies pertaining to the program.

This program can also be utilized in the community. Posters can be made that can be used at community centers, YMCAs, YWCAs, swimming pools, scout meetings and religious functions. The student leadership group can contact community leaders and employees to explain the program ask them to reinforce the concepts.

Specialized help for students that have many conflicts

Another key component to a comprehensive school violence prevention program is to provide specialized help for students who have many conflicts. Five percent of the students in the middle school can represent over fifty percent of the referrals to the office for disruptive behavior and violence-related offenses. These students can be a detriment to student achievement and a positive school climate.

What can be done to help these students? This question is a difficult one for teachers, administration, parents and community members. There is no simple answer. No one intervention will work. It takes a multi-disciplinary approach to help these students.

It is important to involve the parents in making an improvement plan. They are usually the biggest adult influence in the student's life. Part of the improvement plan could suggest outside counseling for these students, when it is appropriate. The school staff should have a list of outside agencies with the different services that they offer. Family, individual or group counseling will best help some students and their family. School staff should decide if recommending a chemical health assessment is appropriate.

Many families do not follow through with consistent counseling with outside agencies. The school's plans for the student are often the only dependable interventions that are ongoing. The school should try to deliver multiple school-based interventions. Studies have shown that behavior plans can improve behaviors for the short-term. Students on these plans learned how to stop the behaviors that bring about negative consequences and start to positively interact with others. The student should see a person from the student

support team. This person could be the school counselor, social worker or school psychologist. An anger management group could help to reduce the number of violent acts and inappropriate outbursts to teachers. Other groups that could benefit the students could be based on:

- * academic success
- * friendship
- * managing conflicts
- * classroom behavior
- * goal-setting

The student may benefit from both group and individual counseling. Getting a tutor to help these students often assists the student in becoming more organized and focusing on their schoolwork. This tutor also allows the student to create a relationship with an older person that will positively affect other areas of their life.

Mentors have shown to have great value to these students. An evaluation of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program provides evidence that mentoring programs positively affect young people. Those between the ages of 12-16 in the mentoring program were less likely to start using drugs and alcohol and were less likely to be violent. In addition, the study found that participants had improved their school attendance and performance, experienced positive attitudes toward completing schoolwork, and improved their peer and family relationships. The impact was even greater among minority participants: male and female minority participants were approximately 70 % less likely to initiate drug use, and female minority participants were 54 % less likely to initiate alcohol use.

Conclusion

A comprehensive school violence prevention program can enhance student achievement and school climate. School-wide conflict management education and specialized help for students who repeatedly display violent behavior are two essential components to the program. Many schools have used this approach and seen dramatic improvements. Students also benefit by learning the lifelong skill of how to manage conflicts. This program can eventually lead to more success for the school and their students.