



Creating a Positive Climate

Peer Mediation

What Works in Preventing School Violence

Resources

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Peer mediation is a negotiation-based strategy that teaches student mediators alternative strategies to help resolve conflict among their peers. In peer mediation, students trained as conflict managers apply problem-solving strategies to assist their peers in settling disputes in a manner satisfying to all parties. Such a strategy may help keep many minor incidents from escalating over time into more serious incidents. More importantly, peer mediation teaches students an alternative set of skills that they can apply in conflict situations. Over time, students in schools with effective peer mediation programs learn that there are alternatives to violence for solving personal problems or resolving interpersonal conflict.

Overview

In mediation, an impartial third party attempts to help others come to a win-win, rather than a win-lose resolution of conflict. In peer mediation, student mediators are taught a process of communication and problem-solving that they apply to help their peers reach settlements of their disagreements without confrontation or violence. In the process of training, mediators learn that conflict can be constructive and positive, and that their role as mediators is not to judge, nor to force an agreement or solution. Rather, students come to mediation voluntarily, and are guided by peer mediators to move from blaming each other to devising solutions acceptable to all parties.

Peer mediation programs grew out of programs, such as the Community Boards Program in San Francisco or Resolving Conflict Creatively in the New York City Public Schools, that were developed by attorneys and child advocates in the mid-1970's. Some programs, such as the Peacemakers program, teach all students in the school processes for mediating disputes. Others select and train a cadre of students who act as the school's conflict managers.

Peer mediation has been used in a variety of situations. While some peer mediation programs mediate only in informal situations, such as the playground, others bring peer mediation into the classroom for resolving student disputes. Some more formal programs may even establish a "mediation office" in which all peer mediation occurs. Although it can be implemented as a stand-alone program, most conflict resolution programs recommend that peer mediation be used as one piece of a broader curriculum of violence prevention and conflict resolution.

What We Know About Peer Mediation

The spread of peer mediation programs around the country has outpaced research on its effects; as a result, there is much we still need to know about the effectiveness of peer mediation. Yet a wide variety of studies conducted in different locations and situations have found that peer mediation appears to be a promising strategy for improving school climate.

A well-conducted peer mediation program can be successful in changing the way students approach conflict. Students appear to be able to learn the steps of peer mediation, and to use and retain them over a period of months. The use of peer mediation can substantially change how students approach and settle conflicts. In one middle school, 83% of students trained in peer mediation reported 'win-win' settlements, while 86% of untrained controls reported that conflicts resulted in a 'win-lose' outcome.

These changes in turn appear to lead to other positive outcomes. Student attitudes toward negotiation may become more positive, with students expressing a greater

willingness to help friends avoid fights and solve problems, and less likely to believe that certain individuals deserve to be “beaten up.” While some studies have found no overall differences in perceptions of student climate, a number of others have reported that both students and teachers believe that peer mediation significantly improved their school climate. There is also evidence that implementing peer mediation programs can be associated with fewer fights, fewer referrals to the office, and a decreased rate of school suspension. Finally, for the student mediators themselves, learning the mediation process has been shown to increase self-esteem, and even improve academic achievement.

Making It Work

Thus, peer mediation can have positive effects on student conflict resolution and school climate. Yet the incompleteness of our knowledge, combined with occasional failures in peer mediation, suggests that success is not automatic. Rather, the benefits of peer mediation may depend on how well the program is planned and carried out.

Planning. An effective peer mediation program is a significant undertaking that requires a great deal of prior planning. A number of logistical decisions should be made beforehand. Which students will be eligible to be mediators, and how will they be chosen? Where and when will mediation occur? The logistics of working with student and teacher schedules to ensure coverage by the peer mediators may in itself be a daunting task. Will students mediate singly or in teams? What types of conflicts can student mediators address? Some schools, for example, reserve the right to settle conflicts involving physical violence to teachers and administrators. To deal with these and other logistical issues, it is probably necessary that there be a facilitator or school team with responsibility for planning and implementation.

Training. Since students often come with attitudes about conflict that are very much at odds with the idea of negotiation, training student mediators in the assumptions and processes of peer mediation is critical. It has been estimated that initial training of peer mediators requires at least a 12-15 hour commitment. During that training, students must learn basic principles of peer mediation (e.g., that conflict can be positive), and increase their awareness of how conflict develops. They are also taught communication and problem solving strategies to help themselves and others defuse conflict. Finally, role playing and active learning are essential during training, so that student mediators can learn skills to help peers move from mutual blame toward solutions acceptable to all parties.

Ongoing Implementation. Even after peer mediation has been established, ongoing monitoring of the program is essential.

The facilitator(s) should monitor the extent to which the mediators are used, the success of mediators in using the process and resolving disputes, and how the mediators and their peers view mediation. If these details are ignored, student mediators may force solutions on their peers, may be viewed as “goody-goodies” by their peers, and ultimately may end up without any “business”. Thus, it is probably necessary to have weekly or bi-weekly meetings of the student mediators to provide ongoing training, and ensure that mediators continue to be enthusiastic and effective. Finally, to be most effective, peer mediation should be part of a whole school effort. Teachers, administrators, and other staff need to understand and support the goals and processes of peer mediation. Although peer mediation is often implemented independently of other components, integrating peer mediation into a broader program that includes lifeskills or a violence prevention curriculum appears to increase the effectiveness of the program.

Summary

Without training in negotiation, students appear to resolve most conflicts by either withdrawing or forcing a solution. A well-conducted peer mediation program can teach students alternative strategies to aggression and withdrawal for settling conflicts. In particular, student mediators learn communication and problem-solving strategies that can enable them to help their peers find mutually satisfying solutions to disputes. This can lead to improved school climate, and even decreased office referrals and suspensions. Yet peer mediation is complex; in order to be successful, there must be adequate planning and especially training of mediators. A facilitator or team must attend to logistical details, ensure that peer mediators are trained in both the assumptions and processes of mediation, and monitor the success of mediators. With adequate attention to these details, peer mediation appears to be a promising tool that, used as part of a broader program, can help teach students methods to settle their conflicts without resorting to violence.

— Russell Skiba and Reece Peterson

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About the Safe & Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing and studying prevention-based approaches to school safety. The Project is currently working with schools in districts in Indiana and Nebraska to integrate best-practice strategies in school violence prevention into comprehensive school-based plans for deterring school disruption and violence.

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