Conflict Resolution Skills for Teens

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Conflict, violence, and bullying are escalating in schools nationwide. Educators today express unprecedented concern about school and classroom disruptions that steal instructional hours and endanger the safety of students.

Some amount of conflict occurs normally in all schools. However, schools that are large, have limited resources, or serve highly diverse populations often experience pervasive
conflict. Outside the school, a corresponding escalation in aggressive and violent behaviors exists in society at large. Our culture inadvertently supports violence through advertising, social relationships, politics, the media, and entertainment. At the same time, a serious and continual breakdown in the nuclear family often leaves the job of parenting to the nation’s educators.

Often, conflicts escalate because students and the adults around them don’t know how to respond to disagreements and confrontations pro-socially and creatively. Peers — sometimes even parents — reward aggressive responses to conflict. These responses are modeled on television and in movies, where even the “good guys” maim and kill in order to “win.” Obviously, our society and our schools are in critical need of people with effective pro-social conflict resolution skills.

Traditional discipline procedures (expulsion, time-out rooms, suspensions, and scolding) teach students to depend on authority figures to resolve conflicts, and in the process obstruct student ethical development. Total reliance on authoritarian approaches is a serious mistake with potentially dire consequences.

To cope with the institutional problems created by conflict, and to help students and staff handle conflict better, school-based conflict resolution programs have emerged as valid and promising alternatives to adult dominance. There are now thousands of school-based conflict resolution programs in the nation. Students are learning to fight fair, listen to each other’s viewpoints, discuss their differences, seek compromise, and solve mutual problems. It is recognized that conflict management is an essential skill for a democratic society.

Where they exist, school-based conflict resolution programs have produced impressive results:
• Teachers report fewer fights and more caring student behavior.
• Administrators notice improved attendance and a dramatic decline in the number of suspensions. They spend less time on disciplinary matters.
• Students, parents, and teachers change their attitudes toward conflict. Instead of viewing conflict as a problem to be avoided or a prelude to negative confrontation, they see it as a process which defines values and leads to growth.

By enabling students to mediate their own disputes, educators may be synthesizing the finest potential in the school—the creative, constructive dynamic inherent in conflict.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS FOR TEENS teaches students how to mediate disputes and negotiate solutions. It develops the ability of students to regulate their own actions by giving them opportunities to make decisions regarding how to behave and then follow through on those decisions. The program creates an environment of acceptance and high expectations, where conflict is handled creatively and pro-socially. It reduces violence and drastically diminishes the need for outside intervention.
Lack of understanding between individuals and groups who are different with respect to such things as race, religion, appearance, life-style, cultural values, and physical or other disabilities is one of the oldest, most pervasive sources of conflict. Because most of the activities and Sharing Circles in CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS FOR TEENS involve students in a continuing dialog — an exchange of experiences, opinions, and feelings — students build a sound base for effectively dealing with conflict situations that stem from these differences.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS FOR TEENS teaches all of these skills using a varied methodology heavily weighted with experiential, cooperative learning strategies. The activities serve as building blocks in a coherent curriculum for developing the skills and strategies of conflict prevention, management and resolution.

The following is a summary of the main components of CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS FOR TEENS:

**Fundamental Skills Related to Conflict Management**

Many potential conflicts can be avoided by communicating effectively. In addition, students who have learned to listen well and express themselves accurately are better able to deal effectively with conflict when it occurs. However, communicating in the stressful environment that usually accompanies conflict requires much greater skill than does normal communication. The communication activities in this section are designed to help students learn specific communication strategies that are crucial to creative and positive conflict resolution.

No conflict is ever resolved without at least one decision — often several. Decision making is absolutely fundamental to conflict resolution. The issues of problem solving and decision making are given particular attention in this section. Students are helped to understand the processes and influences that shape decision making and problem solving and receive repeated practice in both processes.

**Understanding the Nature of Conflict**

In order to develop healthy, confident attitudes toward conflict and conflict resolution, students need to examine its nature — what it is, how it is born, how it grows, and how it dies. They need to face their prejudices and fears about conflict and see conflict for what it is — a necessary and normal process that can have positive or negative results, depending on how it is handled.
The activities in this section help students define conflict, identify common sources of conflict, and become aware of vocabulary and body language that tend to escalate and de-escalate conflict. The students are helped to recognize that most people respond to most conflicts with the same learned patterns of behavior, and each student assesses and evaluates the effectiveness of his or her own conflict style. As an alternative to the use of unconscious conflict styles, the students consider the value of developing a repertoire of conscious conflict strategies. Finally, students learn to differentiate between assertive, aggressive, and passive behaviors and understand how these behaviors tend to affect the life cycle of a conflict.

**Developing Conflict Resolution Skills**

Students need to become acquainted with a range of conflict management strategies, discussing the relative pros and cons of each. In addition, they need many opportunities to practice conflict management strategies safely and enjoyably, so that they can internalize and refine their skills.

This section includes specific strategies that help students handle both unexpected and planned confrontations, resolve conflicts, cope with and reduce anger, manage the residual feelings that follow conflict, and openly receive and evaluate criticism.

In addition to the role plays and other practice techniques imbedded in the activities, several additional approaches to behavioral rehearsal are outlined, including role-play variations, and the use of reading, writing, and art assignments — all appropriate for secondary classrooms and counseling groups. Finally, a number of role-play starters are provided in the form of conflict scenarios typical of those encountered by young people.

**Sharing Circles**

The Sharing Circle is a unique small-group discussion process in which participants share their feelings, experiences, and insights in response to specific, assigned topics. Sharing Circles are loosely structured, and participants are expected to adhere to rules that promote the goals of the circle while assuring cooperation, effective communication, trust, and confidentiality.

Over twenty-five years of using Sharing Circles with students and educators worldwide has demonstrated the power of the Sharing Circle in contributing to the development of conflict resolution skills. Circles can noticeably accelerate the development and internalization of the conflict strategies introduced in this book. They are a key ingredient in bringing
about the growth necessary for students to engage in the level of self-management required to effectively manage and resolve conflict.

This section contains over twenty fully developed Sharing Circles, along with all of the information you need to become a skilled circle facilitator. Please do not attempt to lead a circle until you have read this introductory material. Then use circles liberally, allowing their innumerable benefits to venerate every aspect of your conflict program.

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