

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Behavior Intervention and Support Module:
Conflict Resolution

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Introduction

Conflict between peers and teachers, especially at the secondary level is to be expected. Unfortunately, conflict is often perceived as negative and to be avoided at all costs. Teaching students and teachers how to handle conflict can be instructive and empowering.

Conflict Styles: Aggressive, Passive, Problem Solving

Generally people tend to be **aggressive** or attacking when presented with a conflict situation or passive, denying that the conflict exists. The aggressor is determined to be right and prove the other wrong. The **passive** person often doesn't want to deal with the conflict at all. These two styles, though unsuccessful, are used in most conflict interactions. The third style, **problem solving** turns conflict into a win-win situation.

Conflict is viewed as an opportunity to learn and grow from the experience. When both parties try to gain an enhanced understanding of one another's differing points of view, it increases the likelihood that communication will improve fostering acceptance and tolerance for diversity of opinion. As a result, both parties are more prone to develop a fair and equitable decision.

When individuals adopt an aggressive or passive style of behavior towards conflict, it creates a win-lose situation ensuring the conflict will happen once again.

Communication:

Communication comes from the Latin word "communicare" or to care about what we say and about how others see the world. Communication must be a meaningful exchange of perceptions between the sender and the receiver. When two people are able to communicate clearly—to understand and to make themselves understood, they may find that there really is no problem at all. Unfortunately, poor communication causes most conflict. On the other hand, clear communication is necessary for effective problem solving or conflict resolution.

As educators we must also be aware that students come from different cultures, ethnic, linguistic, and family backgrounds. Students have different personal experiences, aspirations, and expectations. Our most important role as educators, then, becomes one of understanding the unique differences and to incorporate those differences into our instruction. We must also be keenly aware that these differences can be potential conflict hot buttons.

Most conflict can be averted or handled responsibly if teachers appreciate student diversity and setup opportunities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue through cooperative groups, student councils, service learning projects, and social skills training. Students must feel as though their opinions are valued and that teachers take what they say seriously.

Student-Teacher Conflict Resolution

Linda Albert, a school psychologist and author of “Cooperative Discipline” suggests a six-step approach to resolving conflict between teachers and students.

Step 1: Define the problem objectively. Pinpoint the behavior causing the problem.

Step 2: Declare the need. Why is this a problem for the teacher and the student?

Step 3: Describe the feelings. If both the teacher and student describe their feelings it paves the way for a rational handling of the problem.

Step 4: Discuss solutions. Brainstorm many solutions to the problem. Weigh the pros and cons of each solution. Drive for a workable solution.

Step 5: Decide on a plan. Use the solution that seems to make to most sense from the brainstorming session. Be specific about when the plan will begin and set a time to evaluate its effectiveness. When both the teacher and student sign the plan it enhances the plans meaning.

Step 6: Determine the plan’s effectiveness: Meet with the student on the specified date to review the plan. Renegotiate the plan if needed and set another date. If you are satisfied, acknowledge your efforts.

Conflict Resolution with Difficult Students

As indicated earlier most conflict can be averted between students and teachers if positive communication and openness prevail in interpersonal communication. However, when students for one reason or another adopt an aggressive or passive conflict resolution style they can present the teacher with challenges that could inadvertently push them into a “fight or flee” response pattern. Albert outlines some of these behavioral patterns.

Stonewalling:

- Behavior: Students refuse to respond verbally and drive for a workable solution.
- Solution: The teacher can decide what will happen next. It's best to wait a few seconds before you make the decision because students generally want to be included in a decision. Thank the student and end the conference.

Verbal Disrespect:

- Behavior: Students will often use foul language to get a rise out of the teacher.
- Solution: Maintain your cool and leave the scene or tell the student he or she has a choice to treat you with respect or he or she can leave the room.

Blaming others:

- Behavior: Students often blame others rather than taking responsibility of their feelings or actions.
- Solution: Redirect the student to the issue at hand by saying; "Let's find a solution."

Unworkable solution:

- Behavior: Sometimes students suggest an "off the wall" solution that is inappropriate. When this happens, it is best to ask the student to offer a more reasonable solution.
- Solution: Brainstorm other workable solutions with the student.

Student to Student Conflict Resolution:

The six steps outlined by Albert work equally as well for students. A mediator, often a student conflict manager, peer counselor or the teacher, remains neutral and guides the students through the six steps. According to Johns and Carr (1995) this process promotes active listening, problem analyzing, cooperative decision making, and dispute settlements.

A conflict manager might use the following process:

1. "Hi my is _____ and I'm a conflict manager." (This wording can vary at the high school level but is appropriate at the elementary and middle school level).
2. "Do you want to solve the problem with us?"
3. If yes, move to a different area to talk.
4. "Will you agree to 4 rules?"
 - a. do not interrupt
 - b. no name calling or put downs
 - c. be as honest as you can
 - d. agree to solve the problem

Student # 1 agrees to:

Student # 2 agrees to: