

Conflict Resolution in Schools

In any school community there is the potential for conflict.

Students may misunderstand each other. Teachers may disagree on resource allocation. Parents may diverge on how the school should be. Emotions can run high on a variety of issues. The potential for conflict exists because people have different needs, views and values. The challenge for schools, as for the wider community, is to find ways of managing conflict constructively so that those involved can learn and grow from the experience.

The purpose of this guide

is to encourage and help schools to achieve co-operative and supportive working relationships between staff, students and parents. It describes a **positive problem-solving process, mediation**, which, when utilised by schools, leads to less conflict and better outcomes for all involved. The guide should be a useful resource for staff, students and parents.

Each school may develop a range of strategies

for the effective prevention and management of conflict. These strategies could include training in conflict resolution skills and co-operative classroom processes and procedures for resolving grievances. Mediation is one effective and empowering strategy for successful resolution of conflict.

Mediation is a positive problem-solving process

that can prevent conflicts and misunderstandings from becoming protracted and destructive disputes. It aims to help people resolve their differences. It helps disputing parties to assess their options realistically and reach mutually acceptable solutions. The mediation process encourages future co-operation.

It is a structured, goal-directed process that follows clear steps, and resolves disputes confidentially. An independent third party, the mediator, helps the parties to talk with one another, and to listen to one another's grievances. Through this exchange of information parties gain insight into how the other is feeling about the situation, and they achieve understanding and respect. The mediator focuses discussion between the parties on problem-solving rather than blame and punishment.

While other methods of conflict resolution in schools may involve a solution or decision being imposed upon the parties by someone in authority, mediation invites parties to formulate their own solutions, and to take responsibility for their actions.

Mediation is a conflict resolution process that can be applied across the school community. As such, it is an ideal process to integrate into whole school community policies and procedures.

Why does mediation work?

For people to be satisfied with the way a dispute or problem has been resolved, they need to feel that:

- The process was fair, ie their issues were heard and understood
- The agreement or decision reached was reasonable and fair
- The relationship between parties has been helped by the process
- They can manage their relationship in the future

Mediation can achieve these results.

What can be mediated?

Many common conflicts in schools can be mediated. Some examples of student/student, parent/parent, teacher/teacher, parent/school, teacher/student and teacher/administration disputes are listed below.

Student/Student

- Name calling
- Teasing
- Exclusion
- Friendship problems
- Rumours
- Property issues
- Fighting

Parent/Parent

- Supervision
- Discipline
- Bullying

Teacher/Teacher

- Curriculum
- Resources
- Teaching strategies
- Personal style

Parent/School

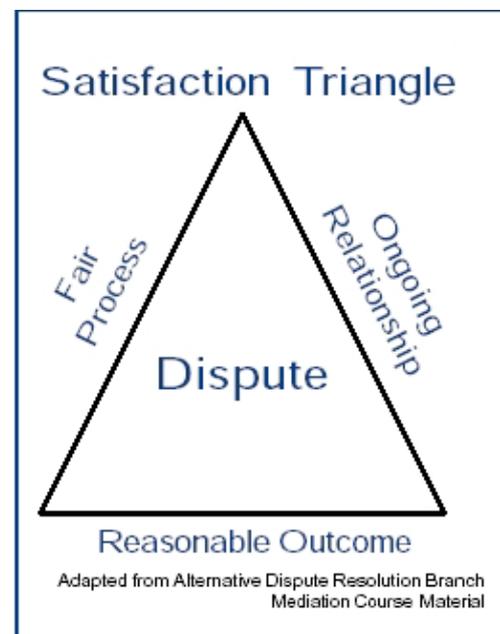
- Student management
- Class or form group allocation
- Catering for individual learning needs
- Personality clashes
- Uniform
- Co-curricular demands
- Homework demands

Teacher/Student

- Work loads
- Homework
- Punctuality
- School responsibilities
- Behaviour

Teacher/Administration

- Working conditions
- Duties allocation



Peer Mediation

As part of a whole school approach to student welfare, schools may consider introducing peer mediation. Often student/student disputes can be resolved best by student mediators. Students can be trained in the skills of mediation so that they can act as mediators for their peers. Not all conflicts may be suitable for peer mediation. Other processes may be more appropriate in situations involving assault, theft, alcohol or drug use.

Peer mediation programs must be co-ordinated by staff trained in mediation who provide ongoing support to student mediators.

"Well developed whole school conflict management and curriculum plans will often include peer mediation as one program valuable for the school to implement as part of the big picture of school based dispute resolution."

McMahon, C. (1998). **The national and international perspective on peer mediation: A need for a whole school approach for meaningful change.** Paper presented at the 4th National Mediation Conference.

"Teaching every student how to negotiate and mediate will ensure that future generations are prepared to manage conflicts constructively in career, family, community, national and international settings."

Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R.T. (1995). Teaching students to be peacemakers: The results of five years of research. **Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 1**, 417-438.

Basic Steps in Mediation

1. Creating the context – a comfortable and private space and sufficient uninterrupted time are provided
2. Explaining the process – the purpose and ground rules of mediation are discussed
3. Listening to what happened – both sides are enabled to tell their story in turn and without interruption
4. Defining problems and concerns – concerns are clarified and an agenda is set by the mediator with participants
5. Focusing on the future and finding solutions – solutions that suit both parties are sought from the parties themselves
6. Concluding – a shared agreement is confirmed and sometimes written down.

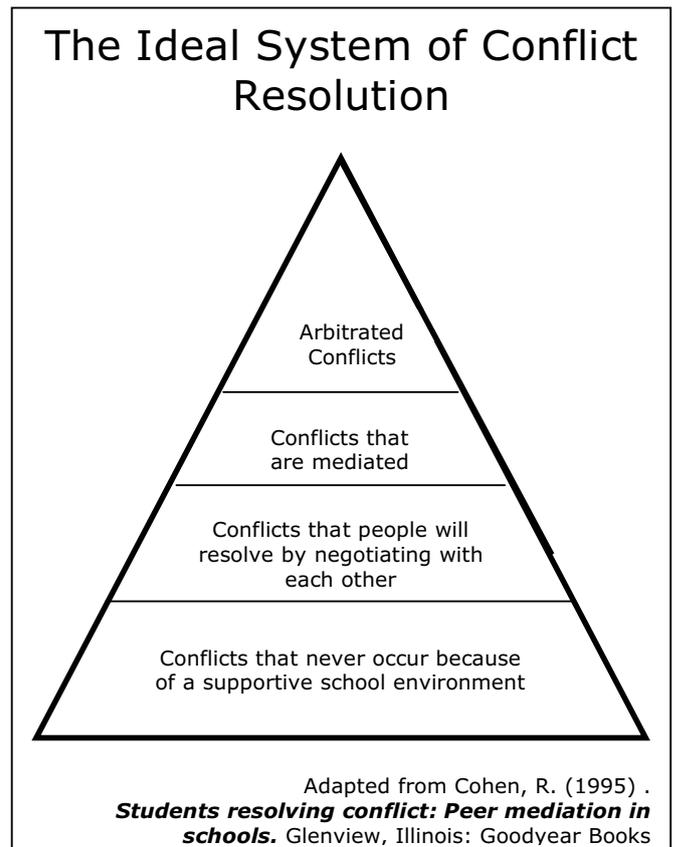
A mediator uses the following skills:

- A non-judgemental tone of voice and impartial body language
- Questions that will lead the discussion forward
- Active listening
- Acknowledgement of feelings
- Positive reframing of information

Training

People interested in becoming mediators will need training to develop and refine their skills of mediation. Training provides the opportunity to learn the steps of mediation, practice the skills required in the process and discuss potential difficulties or ethical issues that might arise during the mediation session. Mediation training also has the added benefit of allowing people to develop or enhance life and communication skills that are relevant to all relationships.

Undergoing a training course in mediation is essential for key personnel in a school whose roles involve management of students and staff and who liaise with parents when problems arise. Having a group of trained mediators from the staff, parent and student bodies would be valuable for cross-group conflicts where mediators would work together modelling co-operation. At times it may be more appropriate to call in an independent mediator from outside the school. Schools implementing peer mediation should develop links with professional mediators who can provide ongoing consultation and support.





Whole school approach*

Mediation should be part of a whole school approach to the management of conflict. When energies are not wasted in unproductive conflict, better teaching and learning can take place. The aim would be to create a whole school community that manages the conflicts with skill and insight, constructively rather than destructively. In such a school conflict would be approached as an opportunity for learning and growth.

What would a whole school approach to conflict look like?

1. The whole school approach would have clear conflict management policies and procedures. These would be integrated with school policy areas such as equal opportunity, anti-harassment/bullying, and welfare and discipline and occupational health and safety policies.
2. The school administration would model effective management of conflict
3. Staff would model positive, co-operative and collaborative relationships
4. Staff would use co-operative processes in the classroom
5. Training in conflict management skills would be included in the curriculum
6. All staff would receive professional development in conflict management
7. The school would engage in partnership with local community organizations and groups to develop approaches to the prevention of conflict.#

NB. The whole school model links to the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) (1999), *Framework for student support services in Victorian government schools*.
<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/wellbeing/publication/policy.htm>

* Adapted from the work of David and Roger Johnson, University of Minnesota

#Coleman, P. & Deutsch, M. (2001). *Introducing co-operation and conflict resolution in schools: A systems approach*. In D.J. Christie, R.V. Wagner & D.D.N. Winter (Eds.).
Peace, conflict and violence: Peace psychology for the 21st century. N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Case Studies

These case studies are based on real situations. Mediations such as these take place alongside other pro-active measures within a school community's code of conduct and code of practice.

Dispute between two Year 2 girls over playing in the sandpit

The Dispute

Two Year 2 students are in dispute over sharing the playing space in the sandpit area. One of the girls has been told by another girl that there is not enough room for her. She is therefore unable to play, and feels sad at being left out. As a result she becomes nasty. She starts calling the other girl names, then throws sand at her.

The Process

Students in the area at the time notify the peer mediators who make their way to the sandpit area. The girls agree to peer mediation. The class teacher decides to incorporate the theme of 'playing together' into future lessons.

The Mediated Resolution

- The girls agree to be nicer to each other, and to share the playing area

Dispute between two Year 9 boys over name-calling

The Dispute

At lunchtime David is calling William and his family names. Feeling offended, William starts to challenge David verbally, then pushes him. David reacts by punching William. William holds David in a headlock and punches him. Both boys end up fighting on the ground. At this point the teacher on duty intervenes and breaks up the fight.

The Process

The Deputy Principal suspends both boys for a day, and recommends the boys attend peer mediation. The boys agree to peer mediation.

The Mediated Resolution

- To respect one another and their families
- To accept the school's code of conduct
- To keep away from each other at lunchtime

Dispute between staff members

The Dispute

John and Clare, two highly valued staff members, cannot seem to co-operate. They work in the same subject area, with John in the senior school, and Clare in the junior school. Their positions require that they work together and share information in curriculum development, but the friction between them is causing problems between the two groups of staff for whom they are responsible.

John feels that Clare isn't a team player. In meetings he feels that she ignores agreed agenda items, and that she dominates the conversation. He would rather not have to work with her at all.

Clare feels that John doesn't communicate essential information to her, and is particularly concerned because she feels she has heard of some parent complaints regarding their joint subject area. She is uncomfortable in meetings as he often addresses her in a sarcastic manner in front of others.

The Process

Being committed to continuity of programming in curriculum areas, the Principal intervenes. He decides to bring in an independent mediator to assist in resolving the dispute. Clare and John both agree to this.

The Mediated Resolution

- Agree to respect one another's individual skills and strengths
- Agree to conduct themselves professionally in meetings, to refrain from personal attacks, and to ensure that staff see them as working co-operatively
- Agree to give one another equal speaking time in meetings
- A formal agenda is to be circulated prior to meetings, the agenda is to be adhered to; minutes are to be taken, and meetings are to start and finish promptly
- Prompt communication of all relevant information is to have a high priority.

Dispute between families over bullying

The Dispute

Sarah complains to her parents that she is being bullied by another Year 7 girl, Jane. Sarah claims that Jane has spread negative rumours about her and makes fun of Sarah at every opportunity.

Mr & Mrs T. complain to the school. The school interviews both girls, their friends, and possible witnesses. The claim is found to be inconclusive. Both girls receive detentions, Jane for swearing at Sarah, and Sarah for punching Jane. Both girls report being provoked by the other.

Sarah's mother takes it upon herself to reprimand Jane. Jane is scared by this, and reports it to her parents, who contact the school

The Principal speaks to Mrs T. who claims she felt forced into such action and that, as the school isn't doing anything to resolve the issue, she has instructed her daughter to fight back.

The Process

The Principal recommends mediation to the families. Although there is extreme reluctance to participate, both sets of parents, and their daughters, meet with a mediator from a local mediation service.

The Mediated Resolution

- When she feels ready, and in order to 'break the ice', Sarah will say 'Hello' to Jane when they pass each other at school
- The girls agree that if other students start to talk about either girl, they will not participate in the conversation, and will tell others that 'it's over, and it's not an issue anymore'
- If incidents occur in the future, the girls will go straight to the Student Welfare Co-ordinator who will attend to their concerns.

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Promoting Professional Conflict Resolution

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This guide was prepared as a community service by: Sandy Cahir, Liz Freeman, Fran Gass, Monica Hill & Fred Stern who comprised the VADR Inc. Mediation in Education Sub-Committee 2001

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