

## Violence Among Youth

*William C. Elmore, M.A.  
John F. Kennedy High School  
Bronx, New York*

In trying to curb the rise of violence among youth, schools have turned to a number of measures, including metal detectors, security personnel and peer mediation programs. One approach tried in New York City has been to teach students conflict negotiation skills. The thinking behind this initiative was that many students simply don't have the skills to end a conflict except by fighting it out. If they can learn to talk it out instead, violent incidents would decrease.

In the spring of 1992, along with teachers from other high schools, I was given a week of training in conflict negotiation. After the training, I developed a unit on conflicts and how to peacefully resolve them. Relieved of teaching on class, I visited each ninth grade social studies class three times a semester, reaching 600 students.

The topic for the first session was "How do we experience conflicts?" I would begin the class by asking for 12 volunteers, which I divided into two groups. Speaking to each group in private, I would point to a stripe on the floor that I had made with masking tape. I would tell them that this is your side of the line. Your job when I say, "go" is to get the students on the other side of the line over to your side any way you could think of. The two groups then lined up facing each other. Without fail, the students would be pulling at and wrestling with each other within 15 seconds of the word "go". After a minute of this mayhem, I would call "time" and have them return to their seats. I would ask of the students who had observed the exercise what they had seen. Responses would be, "pulling and shoving", "a fight", "a brawl". I would then ask students from each group what my directions to them were. After the students learned that they were identical for each group, I asked participants why they picked yanking and pulling as the means to achieve their goal? Were there any other ways they could achieve it? After getting responses like bribery and trickery, I would ask if they could think of a way in which everyone could achieve their goal. Eventually a student would figure out that if the opposing groups had switched places at the same time, everyone would be a winner. I would ask two volunteers to try that approach. A discussion of what would need to happen for this to take place in real life would ensue. As well, I involved students in other exercises to explore how a win/lose situation invariably descends into lose/lose and why a win/win solution is the only viable one.

The second day's topic was "What are the possible solutions to a conflict?" As students were entering the room and finding their seats, I would secretly enlist two students and pointing to a pencil I had placed on the floor, ask them to begin fighting over it as soon as I had begun the class. After the class had witnessed the fight over the pencil I would ask the students to brainstorm possible solutions to the conflict, and I would list their responses on the blackboard. Likely responses would be "share it", "break it in half", "Jessica keeps it", "throw it away". We would then go through the list and identify each solution as win/win, win/lose or lose/lose. The point to the exercise was that for any conflict, there are many possible solutions and some are better than others. For the remainder of the session, I would use other exercises that reinforced this idea.

The third day was devoted to "How can we negotiate a conflict?" In this session I introduced some skills by which they might turn a conflict into win/win. A key concept in resolving a conflict is knowing the difference between someone's need and their position. To illustrate this concept I would hold out an orange and tell the class that two students, Annie and Johnny both want the orange. What should I do? When I received the response that I should cut it in half so that two students could share it, I would do so. I would then say that Annie and Johnny are still not happy. Perhaps we should ask them what they want the orange for. Annie, as it turns out, was hungry and wanted to eat the fruit, whereas Johnny wanted to make orange flavored cookies and wanted its peel. While both their positions were "I want the orange", their needs were quite different. I would have students role-play a conflict

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between a parent and a child or two students caught up in a he said/she said situation. When the participants were arguing from their positions and not addressing the underlying needs I would freeze the actors and have the rest of the class offer suggestions. Once the student-actors identified each other's needs and attended to them, the conflicts were successfully resolved.

Three 40-minute lessons a semester were hardly inclusive, but I believe I was able to instill some basic concepts. At the very least, students were introduced to the idea that a conflict does not have to lead to violence and were given some alternative methods to settle them. My experience has shown me that violence among youth will decrease if students are realistically taught about how conflicts originate, escalate and how they can be settled. In extending this knowledge to the entire school community, students, parents and staff, the school environment becomes a happier and safer place.