

Ways to Manage Conflict

**RIGHT
DECISIONS
RIGHT
NOW**

Dear Educator:

Much of what today's students learn about coping with conflict comes from the media and peer groups. For many young people, the lesson learned is that fighting is an acceptable way to deal with conflict and, for some, violent behavior is even seen as a pathway to status. The result has been what journalists are calling "an epidemic of violence" in the nation's schools. William Damon, a leading authority on child development, in his book, *The Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth*, expresses the fear that the agendas of many schools "have been reduced from the pursuit of learning to the far less lofty goal of maintaining discipline and order."

A growing number of schools are responding with innovative programs to reduce violence through mediation and conflict resolution. This study guide, one of a series in the RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW program, is designed to aid in this effort by suggesting ways of integrating the study of conflict and conflict resolution into your curriculum. Through the hands-on activities in the program, students will gain an understanding of the dynamics of human conflict, analyze methods of resolution, and learn new ways to control anger and manage conflict situations in effective, nonviolent ways.

The RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW program is funded by the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, which firmly believes that children should not smoke. The program, created for use with students in grades 6-9, is designed to help them become more effective decision-makers.

We encourage you to share this exciting program with your colleagues. Although the materials are copyrighted, you have permission to make as many copies as you need for educational purposes.

Please take a moment to complete and return the enclosed response card. Your comments help us to create programs that will continue to meet your needs. Returning this card also ensures your continued receipt of free educational programs in the future.

We hope you enjoy sharing this new unit of the RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW program with your students and watching them gain new confidence and skill in addressing conflict in their lives.

Introduction

By grades 6 and 7 many students have become convinced that fighting is not only an acceptable response to conflict but that it actually provides the only way to maintain one's self-respect. The lesson is reinforced daily by what they witness on television, in the neighborhood or among their peers, and sometimes within the family. While no single classroom lesson or unit can counteract those influences, the study of conflict and conflict resolution can help students see that there are more satisfying and effective ways of dealing with conflict.

This study guide, a unit of the RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW program, is designed to strengthen students' decision-making skills through an examination of conflict and how it can be managed. Students will explore the basic dynamics of human conflict, analyze the factors that lead some conflicts to escalate, and consider ways of controlling anger and managing conflict situations more effectively.

The materials will dispel two common misconceptions about conflict. First, there is a tendency for young people to equate conflict with violence, in large part because it is violent conflict that captures our attention, both in real life and in the media. Quieter, nonviolent episodes may not even be recognized as conflict situations. There is also a general misconception that conflict is harmful — a state of discord that can threaten a family or a friendship, or that can destroy the unity of a community or nation. Students' work with the activities will make it clear that, while some conflicts are harmful, most are not. In fact, individual growth and social progress often emerge as healthy responses to conflict situations.

Intended Audience

This program has been designed to be used with students in grades 6-9. The materials can be incorporated into social studies, health or life skills classes.

Objectives

This unit of the RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW program is designed to help students:

- recognize that conflict is a natural and normal part of life.
- understand that a conflict and its outcome can be either healthy or unhealthy.
- become more aware of the dynamics of conflict in their own lives and in the world around them.
- identify the factors that cause some conflicts to become more intense or to escalate toward violence.
- analyze conflicts in their daily lives as well as in history, literature and the media by applying the same framework of questions to all examples.
- use role-playing scenarios to investigate effective methods of controlling anger and managing conflict situations.
- recognize that fighting and other forms of violence usually make conflict situations worse.
- consider ways they can reduce the incidence of fighting and other disruptive behavior in their lives, within their school and within the community.

Program Components

1. Four activity masters to reproduce as individual and group worksheets.
2. This teacher's guide that contains:
 - suggestions for presenting each activity.
 - ideas for extending each activity.

- a list of resources.

3. A full-color wall poster with tips for keeping anger under control and managing conflict.
4. A teacher response card that allows you to comment on the program. Please return this card to ensure that you remain on our mailing list and receive future free educational programs.

Implementing the Program

Group Work

The program is designed so that students work together on one portion of each activity (with the exception of Activity 3, which is a class activity) in groups of 5-6. You can have students remain in the same group throughout the program or change groups for each activity. Each group will have a group leader and a recorder. These positions should change each time, with the recorder reporting the group's conclusions to the class. Group leaders need to keep the group focused and working. The following rules should be established by the leader prior to any discussion.

1. Members are allowed to pass if they feel uncomfortable with a specific topic.
2. No putdowns are allowed.
3. Everyone should take part in the discussion.
4. Any answer is appropriate and worth discussing.

Poster

The poster contains tips to help students learn to manage their anger and deal with conflict situations effectively. Display it in an area where it is easily accessible to students. Encourage them to check the poster often, making the tips on it a part of their daily life.

Follow-Up

Once you have completed this program with your class, encourage students to continue practicing their newly acquired conflict management skills. You can facilitate this by setting aside time for follow-up discussions once or twice a month when students can review the conflicts around them, how the parties involved dealt with the conflicts and whether or not the outcomes were healthy.

Activity One

Conflict Around You

Objectives

- To generate student thinking about what conflict is and how it operates in their lives and in the larger society.
- To help students understand that conflict and its outcome can be either healthy or unhealthy.

Introduction

A good way to introduce the activity is to brainstorm with the class on the meaning of conflict. Write the word *conflict* on the chalkboard and ask students to give you words that they associate with it. Also, bring examples of conflict situations from current events to class (i.e. newspaper/magazine articles). Then use the following series of questions to promote discussion.

- Is conflict the same as violence? Do we tend to think of conflict as something violent or unpleasant? If so, why do you think this is so?
- Is there conflict in nature? Between humans and nature?
- Even without words, how can we tell that a person is in a conflict situation? (body language, facial expressions)

- Do you see any difference between conflict involving two nations and conflict involving two people? What is it?
- What does a legislature such as the United States Congress have to do with conflict?

After discussing the questions and reviewing the words that students had associated with conflict, you might want to write a class definition of conflict. It should not be like a dictionary definition, but consist of statements students can associate with conflict. (E.g. “Conflict can involve individuals, groups or nations.” “Conflict is not the same as violence.”)

Distribute copies of Activity One. Encourage students to talk about each illustration, focusing on what makes the situation a conflict — perhaps even rating it on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, to show the degree of the conflict. The football scene would be the lowest, the scene of two kids physically fighting the highest.

As you discuss the illustrations, elicit from students that:

- a football game (or other sport) is a form of conflict since you have two opposing teams, both wanting to win, but that this involves competition on the field, which is acceptable and healthy.
- a courtroom scene represents the end result of a conflict — between a criminal and the law or between two or more parties in a lawsuit. These cases usually involve peoples’ rights — either those of society (laws) or those of individuals (which encompass a large range, e.g. workers’ rights, civil rights, slander, etc.). In these cases, the outcome is determined by a third party (court of law) rather than by individuals.
- two kids physically fighting is the most obvious of conflicts. It represents a conflict that has

gotten totally out of hand.

Note: Some students will argue, with the approval of parents, that fighting is the best way to settle arguments. Be prepared to discuss this angle with students, eliciting from them the unhealthy outcome from settling a disagreement in this manner.

- a holdup represents a conflict of interest between the thief (who wants the victim’s property) and the victim (who wants to keep it). In most cases, for safety’s sake, it is best to let the thief win.
- a parent/child argument is a common type of conflict, especially at this age, when students are trying to be more independent. Most students have firsthand experience with this type of conflict and will relate to it easily.
- the traffic accident represents a conflict where tempers can flare, with aggressive behavior often exhibited. Discuss how this type of behavior can easily get out of hand.

In Your Group

Divide the class into groups of 5 or 6 students, with a leader and recorder for each group. Each group should fill in the chart with examples of conflict, with group members deciding how they will complete the tasks.

Go over the completed charts in class, asking each group to describe its findings. The process will help students develop a new awareness of how pervasive conflict is in people’s lives and that it is possible to develop skills for managing conflict more effectively. Use the chart reports to draw out key ideas — for example, every TV drama or comedy, every movie, and every novel or short story is built around at least one central conflict; in fact, without the conflict, there is no story. In the group reports, look for examples that will illustrate

both healthy outcomes (people involved resolve conflict peacefully and fairly; growth in making good decisions is evident, etc.) and unhealthy outcomes (conflict ends in violence, frustration and dissatisfaction are evident, etc.).

On Your Own

Ask volunteers to read their paragraphs to the class. Use the paragraphs and discussion to draw out generalizations, wherever possible rephrasing discoveries the students have made about conflict. Some possibilities are:

- We can have inner conflicts, e.g., whether to watch our favorite TV show or study for a test.
- Conflicts are about different beliefs or values — things we feel are important such as fairness, honesty, loyalty, respect and dependability.
- When we make decisions, we are resolving conflicts over beliefs or values, e.g., making a decision about whether or not to go with a friend to a party where you know there will be drugs.
- Conflicts and their outcomes can be either healthy or unhealthy. You really don't want to go to the party and argue with your friend about it. If you say "no" and don't do it, that's a healthy outcome. If you give in to pressure and go just because your friend is but resent going, that's unhealthy.
- Violence is an extreme way of trying to resolve a conflict; most conflicts are resolved without violence.

Extending the Activity

1. Have students keep conflict journals for a few days, noting the conflicts they experience and how they are resolved (or what the alternatives are if not resolved). Let each student decide whether or not to record the most insignificant episodes, such as what color sweater to wear or what to

have for lunch. After 3 or 4 days, ask them to report what they have learned about conflict by keeping the journals. If the record keeping has been conscientious, they are likely to be surprised at how many conflicts they experience every day.

2. Challenge the class, working in groups, to explain why it would be important for each of the following to have an understanding of conflict: team coach, politician, business person, teacher, lawyer, priest/minister/rabbi, environmentalist, civil rights leader, prison warden, marriage counselor, student. The responses will reinforce the idea of the pervasiveness of conflict and the importance of being able to deal with conflict situations in constructive ways.

Activity Two



Objectives

- To educate students to the factors that cause some conflicts to become more intense or to escalate toward violence.
- To help students analyze conflicts in their daily lives.

Introduction

The students' work with Activity One should have made it clear that conflict is something we encounter every day in many different ways and that most conflicts are easily resolved — we have no trouble making the decision that settles the matter. Introduce Activity Two by pointing out that no two conflicts are exactly alike. Most arguments

are settled peacefully, but now and then a dispute leads to a shouting match, often with hurtful statements being made, or someone throwing a punch. In this activity, the class will look at some of the factors that can cause a conflict to escalate to the point where it gets out of hand.

Encourage students to give their opinions on how the factors included in the grid might influence the path a conflict takes. For example:

- Stress plays a role in the following scenario in which Jennifer, an eighth grader, and her mom have a conflict about smoking.

Jennifer's mom has been under a lot of stress at work. She comes home to find Jennifer's jacket thrown over a chair. She picks it up grumbling about how Jennifer never picks up after herself, when a pack of cigarettes falls out of the pocket. Jennifer's mom loses it and accuses Jennifer of smoking. Jennifer says the cigarettes belong to a friend, but her mom doesn't believe her. More heated words are exchanged. Jennifer gets angry and storms out of the house.

Invite students to discuss how stress might have caused this conflict to get out of hand. What other factors might have been involved? (pride, misunderstanding, peer pressure) How might the conflict have been handled differently — by Jennifer? by her mom? Students might role play the scene from both perspectives — with the mother under stress and in a more temperate frame of mind.

In Your Group

Have students work in their groups to analyze the conflict scenario on the activity sheet. Students will recognize that, in this situation, a single factor may have led to fighting, or several factors may have been involved. Since we don't know what is in the minds

of the participants, we can only speculate about what led to their actions. Peer pressure may have helped push either one, or both, into fighting. We can also speculate that Steve may have felt that self-respect was more important than appearing cowardly by compromising or backing down. Misunderstandings or misperceptions may also have been involved. Encourage the groups to consider the problem from different perspectives.

Once students have analyzed what caused the conflict to get out of hand, encourage them to dig deeper into the conflict to learn about underlying factors that may have influenced it. Some questions they might ask are:

- Is Jamie usually a bully? Is this typical behavior for him?
- Does Jamie usually show disrespect for others?
- Have Jamie and Steve had an ongoing disagreement?
- Is Steve sensitive about his size?
- Has Steve been teased in the past about not standing up to someone like Jamie?

Depending upon your class, at your discretion you might want to add some social factors that would add a different dimension to the conflict.

- Jamie is a minority student; Steve is not.
- Jamie is a star on the football team; Steve is a quiet student.
- Jamie is in a gang; Steve is not.

On Your Own

Stress to students that the important part of their journal entry is to get their feelings and observations down on paper, because writing helps us think more clearly about things. Inform students that their journal entries will remain private unless they want to share them: they will have to show them to you to check for completion, but even you will not read them unless given permission.

Extending the Activity

1. Role play the scenario from the activity sheet from different perspectives to help students see how hidden factors can influence the escalation of conflicts. Have two students act out the situation with Jamie being a classmate that Steve doesn't know very well or like very much. Then act it out again, this time with Jamie being Steve's friend. How might the conflict be different?
2. Social scientists refer to a "conflict spiral" — a conflict that escalates or spirals toward violence as each side responds to the actions of the other. Have students select a conflict from a book, history, news story, film, etc. and diagram a spiral to show how each participant's response added to the escalation of the conflict.

Activity Three



Objectives

- To help students learn and practice methods of controlling anger and managing conflict situations.
- To help students recognize that fighting and other forms of violence usually make conflict situations worse.

Introduction

Before you begin this activity, review the main points that emerged from Activities One and Two — all conflicts have certain things in common and there are a number of factors that can lead to conflict getting out of hand.

Note: Activities Three and Four can be interchanged. You might want to present students with tips

for managing conflict (Activity Four and Poster) before you do this activity.

Prior to passing out the worksheet, pair off students to work on specific role plays and establish role-play rules.

- Each role play must stop short of erupting into violence.
- The object of the role play is to manage the situation so that it does not get out of hand and to resolve it in a healthy way.
- Individual pairs will determine who plays which character and who works to control the conflict.

Invite a few pairs to role play their conflict situations for the class. The class can then analyze what each character did to defuse the conflict and whether or not the outcome was healthy. Encourage students to suggest other methods that might have been used to reach the same conclusion.

Once again, depending upon the configuration of your class and at your discretion, you might try overlaying some of these role plays with social factors that might alter the reactions of the characters due to stereotyping, lack of knowledge, emotional influences of personal relationships, etc.

Extending the Activity

1. Encourage students to observe the conflicts they see around them — in school, at home, in the community, in the news, in the movies or in TV programming. Students can report their observations to the class for discussion. They should include in their reports the nature of the conflicts, how they got out of hand, how the conflicts could have been handled in a more positive manner and whether social issues may have contributed to the conflict.

2. Interested students might look into the possibility of developing a conflict resolution program within the school. With the permission of school administrators, they could research the mediation programs that are becoming increasingly popular. A source for information and materials is:

The National Institute for
Dispute Resolution
1726 M Street NW
Suite 500
Washington, D.C. 20036

Keep in mind that these programs involve a good deal of preparation and training.

Activity Four



Objective

- To strengthen students' sense of empowerment to resolve their conflicts in nonviolent and effective ways.

Introduction

Initiate a discussion with students about managing conflict. You might begin by telling them that we are all creatures of habit and tend to react the same way to conflict situations because we are used to reacting that way. Invite students to share how they usually react — argue, walk away, keep quiet, fight, talk it over, stay cool.

Inform students that there are several ways to deal with conflict in a positive way. People have tried all these methods and have found them to work. Then pass out the activity sheets and discuss the tips for managing conflict with students, eliciting from them examples of when they might have seen

these methods at work. Cite examples of historical figures who have dealt with conflict situations in a constructive and positive manner (i.e. Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi).

In Your Group

As groups review the conflict situations presented, they should determine (1) what led to the escalation of the conflict; (2) which tips for controlling anger and managing conflict were used, or could have been used; (3) how the conflict was resolved, or could have been resolved. Conclude by reviewing with the class the basic points that have emerged from the four activities. Invite discussion of ways in which the students' growing understanding of conflict and conflict resolution can help them in their personal decision-making and in improving conflict situations within the school.

Extending the Activity

1. Encourage each group to develop a scene that reflects a conflict situation within the school or the community. They can use the "big game" scenario as a model of what elements to incorporate. If some students feel more comfortable using that fictitious scene, this should be permitted.
2. View a film or TV drama (or comedy) that does not depend on a violent settlement to analyze the methods used to resolve the central conflict and any secondary conflicts that occur.

Resources for Teachers

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