

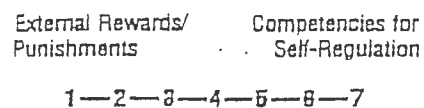
Teaching Students to Be Peer Mediators

David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, Bruce Dudley, and Robert Burnett

While traditional discipline procedures—from expulsion to scolding—teach students to depend on authority figures to resolve conflicts, the Peacemaker Program teaches children how to mediate disputes and negotiate solutions themselves.

Discipline problems plague classrooms and schools. Students bicker, threaten, tease, and harass one another. Conflicts involving racial and cultural differences are increasing. Truancy is epidemic. Violence is escalating. Generally, conflicts among students and between students and staff occur with frequency and consume considerable teacher and administrator time.

Discipline procedures—expulsion, time-out rooms, suspensions, scolding—may be classified on a continuum. They range from those based on external rewards and punishments to those based on teaching students how to cope with stress and adversity. At one end of the continuum the focus is on the faculty and staff controlling and managing student behavior. At the other end, the focus is on students regulating their own and their peers' actions.



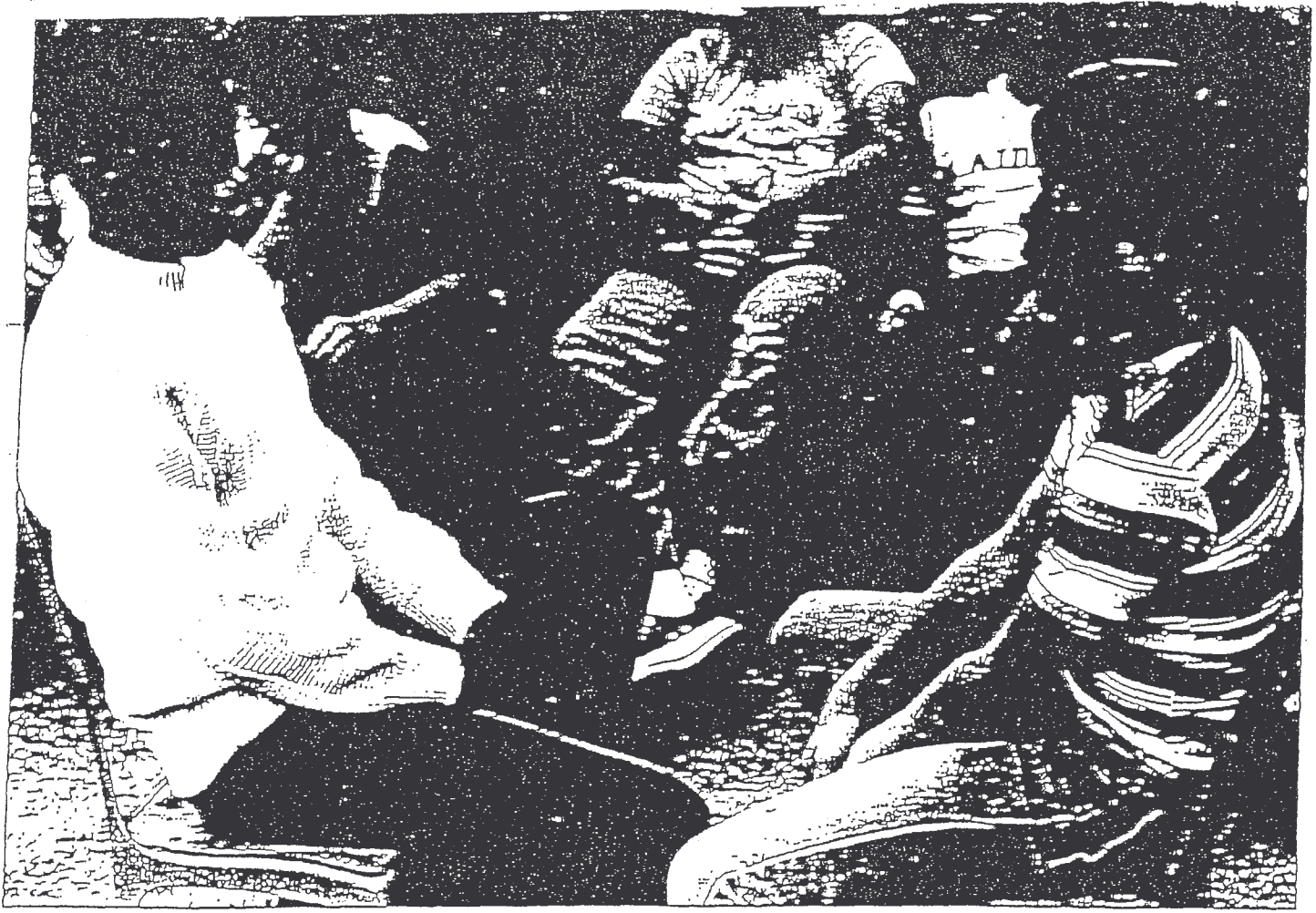
Traditional discipline programs require an adult to monitor student behavior, determine whether it is or is not within the bounds of acceptability, and force students to terminate inappropriate actions. When the infractions are minor, teachers often arbitrate ("The pencil belongs to Mary. Jane, be quiet and sit down.") or cajole students to end hostilities ("Let's forgive and forget. Shake hands and be friends."). If such strategies don't work, students may be sent to the principal's office for a stern but cursory lecture about the value of getting along; a threat that, if the conflict

continues, more drastic action will ensue; and a final admonition to "go and fight no more." If that does not work, time-out rooms might be tried. Eventually, some students are expelled from school.

Such programs teach students that adults or authority figures are needed to resolve conflicts. The programs cost instructional and administrative time and work only as long as students are under surveillance. This approach does not empower students. While adults may become more skillful in controlling students, students do not learn the procedures, skills, and attitudes required to resolve conflicts constructively in their personal lives at home, in school, at work, and in the community.

At the other end of the continuum are programs aimed at teaching students self-responsibility and self-regulation. *Self-regulation* is the ability to act in socially approved ways in the absence of external monitors. It is the ability to initiate and cease activities according to situational demands. Self-regulation is a central and significant hallmark of cognitive and social development. To regulate their behavior, students must monitor their own behavior, assess situations, make judgments as to which behaviors are appropriate, and master the procedures and skills required to engage in desired behavior. In interaction with other people, students have to monitor, modify, refine, and change how they behave in order to act appropriately and competently.

If students are to learn how to regulate their behavior, they must have opportunities to (1) make decisions regarding how to behave and (2) follow through on the decisions made.



Allowing students to be joint architects in matters affecting them promotes feelings of control and autonomy. Students who know how to manage their conflicts constructively and regulate their own behavior have a developmental advantage over those who do not. Ideally, students will be given the responsibility for regulating their own and their classmates' behavior so that teachers can concentrate on instruction rather than control.

Empowering Students To Be Peacemakers

In order to decide which type of discipline program will work best, it helps to know what types of discipline problems are occurring. Typically, most discipline problems involve either conflicts among students, conflicts between students and teachers, or conflicts between students and standards of acceptable conduct. By training students to manage conflicts constructively, a discipline program can empower students to solve their own problems and regulate their own and their classmates' behavior.

Although such programs have been suggested for years (Johnson 1970), only recently have students been trained to be peacemakers.

For the past two years we have implemented a peer mediation program at Highlands Elementary School in Edina School District, Edina, Minnesota. In 30 minutes of training per day for 30 days, students are taught to be peacemakers in three steps. The curriculum *Teaching Students to be Peacemakers* (Johnson and Johnson 1991) provides role-plays and opportunities to practice the procedures and skills involved in negotiating and mediating until students can negotiate and mediate routinely.

Step 1: Negotiation

The first step in the Peacemaker Program is to teach *all* students to negotiate constructive resolutions to their conflicts. The negotiation procedure and skills need to be over-learned so that they are available for use when emotions run high and feelings of fear and anger are intense.

To negotiate solutions, students need to define their conflict, exchange positions and proposals, view the situation from both perspectives, invent options for mutual gain, and reach a wise agreement. Students are taught the following procedure (Johnson and Johnson 1987, 1991):

1. State what you want: "I want to use the book now."
2. State how you feel: "I'm frustrated."
3. State the reasons for your wants and feelings: "You have been using the book for the past hour. If I don't get to use the book soon, my report will not be done on time. It's frustrating to have to wait so long."
4. Summarize your understanding of what the other person wants, how the other person feels, and the reasons underlying both.
5. Invent three optional plans to resolve the conflict.
6. Choose one plan and shake hands.

Students need to learn the negotiation procedure and become skillful in its use in relatively easy situations before they can be expected to use it

to resolve real conflicts. Mediation is easier, and more effective, when students have previously been trained in the negotiation procedure.

Step 2: Conflict Mediation

The second step is to teach all students how to mediate constructive resolutions of their classmates' conflicts.

Mediation is the utilization of the services of another person to help settle a dispute. The purpose of mediation is to help classmates negotiate a constructive resolution to their

must do what you have agreed to do.

f. Anything said in mediation is confidential.

Step 3: The Peacemaker Program

After students are introduced to negotiation and mediation skills, the teacher selects two class members to serve as official mediators each day. Any conflicts students cannot resolve themselves are referred to the class mediators. The mediators wear official T-shirts, patrol the playground and lunchroom, and are available to

mediate all conflicts. The role of class mediator is rotated throughout the class so that each student serves as a class mediator an equal amount of time. Mediating classmates' conflicts is perhaps the

most dramatic way of teaching students the need for the skillful use of each step of the negotiation procedure. Refresher lessons are taught once or twice a week.

The processes of negotiation and mediation allow students to practice joint decision making within a structure that emphasizes a solution/settlement that is acceptable to all parties involved and is, therefore, fair. Students are given the power to decide the outcome (within the constraints of the school policy and the law). Negotiation and mediation are self-empowering. They enable students to make decisions about issues and conflicts that affect their own lives rather than having a decision imposed on them by teachers and administrators.

Results at Highlands Elementary

At Highlands Elementary School we initially gathered data on the need for a Peacemaker Program. We found that even in a suburban, middle-class school such as Highlands, most students were involved in conflicts daily. The conflicts reported (in terms of frequency) were put-downs and teasing, playground conflicts, access or possession conflicts, physical aggression and fights, academic work conflicts, and turn-taking problems. Before training, students often referred

the majority of their conflicts to the teacher. One of the teachers stated in her log, "Before training, students viewed conflict as fights that always resulted in a winner and a loser. To avoid such an unpleasant situation, they usually placed the responsibility for resolving conflicts on me, the teacher."

If students did not bring the conflict to the teacher, they typically used destructive strategies (such as repeating their request and trying to force the other person to give in) that would escalate the conflict. Negotiating an agreement that both students liked was never an option. Students had no idea how to do so. From these findings, we concluded that students were not being taught negotiation procedures and skills in the home or community at large and, therefore, that all students needed to be trained in how to manage conflicts constructively.

Once it was established that conflict training was needed, the question investigated was whether or not the Peacemaker Program worked. Conflict training works if it:

- reduces the number of student-student conflicts referred to teachers and the principal,
- results in students mastering the negotiation and mediation procedures and skills taught, and
- results in students using these procedures and skills in settings other than the classroom.

After students received the negotiation and mediation training, the student-student conflicts that did occur were by and large managed by the students themselves without the involvement of adults. The frequency of student-student conflicts teachers had to manage dropped 80 percent. The number of conflicts referred to the principal was reduced to zero. Such a dramatic reduction of referrals of conflicts to adults changed the school discipline program from one that arbitrated conflicts to one that maintained and supported the peer-mediation process.

To determine how well students learned to negotiate and mediate, students were videotaped negotiating

Traditional discipline programs require an adult to monitor behavior.

conflicts. Mediation is usually contrasted with arbitration. *Arbitration* is the submission of a dispute to a disinterested third party (such as a teacher or principal), who makes a final and binding judgment as to how the conflict will be resolved.

Following is the *mediation procedure* the students are taught (Johnson and Johnson 1987, 1991).

Introduction: When mediating a conflict, the class mediator first introduces him- or herself. The mediator asks students if they want to solve the problem and does not proceed until both answer "yes."

Guidelines: The mediator explains:

- a. "Mediation is voluntary. My role is to help you find a solution to your conflict that is acceptable to both of you."
- b. "I am neutral. I will not take sides or attempt to decide who is right or wrong. I will help you decide how to solve the conflict."
- c. "Each person will have the chance to state his or her view of the conflict without interruption."

Rules: The rules students must agree to are:

- a. Solve the problem.
- b. Do not resort to name calling.
- c. Do not interrupt.
- d. Be as honest as you can.
- e. If you agree to a solution, you

resolutions to two conflicts immediately after the training and six months later. They were also given a questionnaire in which they were to write out how they would mediate two conflicts described. Their responses clearly demonstrated that students knew and were able to apply the negotiation and mediation procedures. There is no doubt that the training was effective. That does not mean it was perfect. Students were disinclined to express their feelings and sometimes did not think to reverse perspectives.

Many of the students reported using the negotiation and mediation skills at home with their siblings. A number of parents volunteered to teachers that students used the negotiation and mediation procedures and skills with their brothers and sisters, neighborhood friends, grandparents, and pets. Perhaps the most interesting evidence that the conflict training program worked was that many parents whose children were not part of the project requested that their children receive the training next year. A number of parents even requested training for themselves.

To ensure that the negotiation and mediation procedures and skills will transfer from the training situation to actual conflict situations in and out of school, teachers should follow several guidelines. Students need to learn not only what the procedure is but also how to actually use it. Overlearning is necessary. If students have to stop and think what they should do, often it is too late to manage the conflicts constructively. Booster sessions are needed throughout the year to help students maintain the use of the procedures. Finally, *all* students must receive the negotiation and mediation training and *all* students must serve as mediators, not just a select few.

Needs of Peacemaking

Students do have procedures for managing conflicts, but often the procedures are not constructive and not shared among all classmates. When students are from different cultural, ethnic, social, and language backgrounds, the multiple procedures

for managing conflicts within classrooms can create some chaos. Life in schools gets easier when *all* students (and staff members) use the same set of procedures in managing conflicts.

Currently, few schools systematically teach students the procedures and skills required for constructive conflict resolution. Without direct training in how to manage conflicts constructively, many students may never become able to do so. Classrooms need to become places where destructive conflicts are prevented and where constructive conflicts are

tencies to (1) regulate their behavior through self-monitoring, (2) judge what is appropriate given the situation and the perspective of the other person, and (3) modify how they behave accordingly.

Teaching *all* students negotiation and mediation procedures and skills results in a schoolwide discipline program that empowers students to regulate and control their own and their classmates' actions. Teachers and administrators are then freed to spend more of their energies on instruction. ■

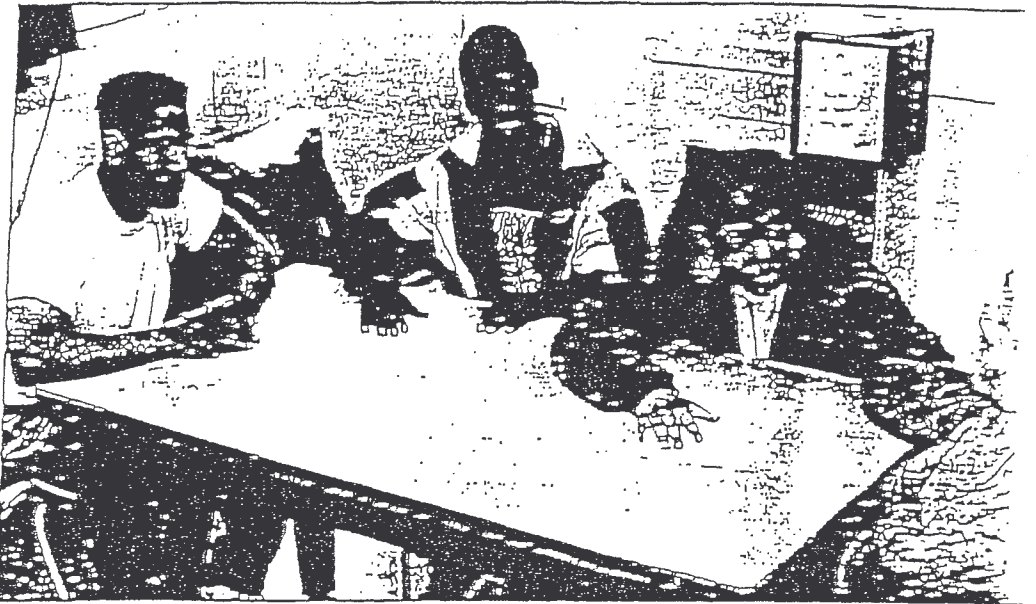


Photo by Tom Kobernick. Courtesy: Education for Social Responsibility, Inc.

Life in schools gets easier when all students and staff members use the same set of procedures in resolving conflicts.

instruction and classroom life.

Conflict in the classroom in and of itself is not bad, but conflict avoided or unresolved is. When a conflict occurs, the students involved first try to negotiate a resolution. If that fails, a classmate mediates their conflict. If that fails, the teacher attempts to mediate the conflict. If that fails, the teacher arbitrates by deciding who is right and who is wrong. If that fails, the principal mediates the conflict. If that fails, the principal arbitrates. When students are taught how to negotiate and are given opportunities to mediate their classmates' conflicts, they are given procedures and compe-

structured, encouraged, and utilized to improve the quality of

References

- Johnson, D. W. (1970). *Social Psychology of Education*. New York: Holt-Rinehart.
- Johnson, D. W., and R. Johnson. (1987). *Creative Controversy: Intellectual Challenge in the Classroom*. Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Company.
- Johnson, D. W., and R. Johnson. (1991). *Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers*. Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Company.

David W. Johnson is Professor of Educational Psychology. Roger T. Johnson is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction. Bruce Dudley is Research Assistant. They can be reached at University of Minnesota, Cooperative Learning Center, 202 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr., S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455-2098. Robert Burnett is Principal, Highlands Elementary School, Edina, MN 55436.