Conflict Resolution

Conflict often stems from differences. Naturally, then, cultural differences among students in schools can be fertile ground for conflicts. But those conflicts do not have to always be negative. By embracing conflict as an opportunity to learn about oneself and others, and by using social and emotional learning and character education, schools can use conflict as a way to grow.

Types of Conflict

David Johnson and Roger Johnson, known for the Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers Program, are co-directors of the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota. They explain that most teachers "receive little training in how to use conflict for instructional purposes" (1995, p. vii). As a result, they write, teachers tend to fear, avoid, and suppress conflicts—"actions that make them worse" (1995, p. vii).

In healthy schools, teachers don’t fear conflict; instead, they recognize that conflicts are "inevitable, healthy, and valuable" (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p. 14). Conflicts in these schools, write Johnson and Johnson (1995), are used to help students and teachers work together to find positive outcomes, thereby honing reasoning and problem-solving skills while, at the same time, helping young people mature and "learn about themselves—what makes them angry, what frightens them, and what is important to them" (p. 16).

There are two different types of conflict: destructive conflict and constructive conflict. The features of these two types of conflict are summarized in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destructive Conflict</th>
<th>Constructive Conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One participant wins at the other’s expense.</td>
<td>All participants achieve their goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants are angry, resentful, hurt, and distrustful.</td>
<td>Participants like, respect, and trust each other more.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The possibility of constructively resolving future conflicts with each other decreases.</td>
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**Conflict Resolution**

Learning to resolve conflicts constructively and ultimately reducing violence at schools requires commitment to the conflict-resolution process and a willingness to keep focused on the long-term goals.

As Johnson and Johnson (1995) explain in *Reducing School Violence Through Conflict Resolution*, two aspects of all conflicts should be considered:

- **Goal 1**: Achieving one’s personal goal, also called *concern for self*.
- **Goal 2**: Maintaining an appropriate relationship with the other person, also called *concern for others*.

The authors go on to provide five ways that people manage conflicts:

- **Problem-solving negotiations**: Finding a solution that will achieve both goals.
- **Smoothing**: Sacrificing Goal 1 for the sake of Goal 2.
- **Forcing or win-lose negotiations**: Sacrificing Goal 2 for the sake of Goal 1.
- **Compromising**: Giving up part of Goal 1 and part of Goal 2.
• **Withdrawing:** Giving up both goals and avoiding both the issue and the person. (Johnson & Johnson, 1995)

In schools, however, maintaining relationships are critical, so Johnson and Johnson (1995) suggest the following rules as guidelines for conflicts within school communities:

- Do not withdraw from or ignore conflict.
- Do not engage in win-lose negotiations.
- Use smoothing only if it is reciprocal over time.
- Compromise when time is short.
- Engage in problem-solving negotiations.

**The Benefits of Peer Mediation**

Although teachers are often pulled into conflicts between students, peer mediation can often be a successful way to solve problems in a student-centered way. Through peer mediation, students learn to trust each other and to take responsibility.

Johnson and Johnson (1995) recommend several steps that can help teachers and peer mediators guide students through conflict resolution:

1. End hostilities, which can include breaking up fights and separating students until they can cool their emotions.
2. Ensure that students are committed to the mediation process and agree to some ground rules for the process.
3. Help students negotiate successfully, which can include
- Helping students communicate.
- Paraphrasing to clarify students’ views.
- Exchanging reasons for their views.
- Showing students how to see the other person’s perspective.
- Creating options for solving the problem.
- Reaching a wise final decision.

4. Finalize the agreement.