



Educating kids: The three 'r's, plus resolution
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Judy Saul / Guest Column

No matter how education changes over the years or how many different subjects kids now study, we still recognize the classic three 'r's — reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic — as a good base of a solid education. However, here at the Community Dispute Resolution Center, we think that when it comes to teaching our youth, it's important to add a fourth 'r': resolution. Understanding how to work through the conflicts that inevitably occur in our lives is a teachable skill of untold value, which is why, since the agency's earliest days, the center has dedicated a significant part of its work to our Youth Conflict Education Programs: Kid Talk, Teen Talk and Peer Mediation. These programs give young people skills to deal with conflict in constructive ways.

All of our conflict education programs begin with a set of exercises designed to encourage youths to analyze what happens during conflict and how conflict affects them. Kids begin to recognize that conflict usually includes strong emotion, which makes it hard to stay calm enough to speak their needs clearly without exaggerating, being sarcastic or overcompensating in some way. The instinct for self-protection kicks in, which can make it challenging to listen, as well. Too often, these factors come together during conflict, with the result being that interactions devolve into accusations, name-calling, verbal attacks or worse.

In creating Kid Talk and Teen Talk, we saw how we could use what we knew from our adult programs and apply it to creating age-appropriate ways for youth to regain a sense of calm and a clear head, and break the cycle of attack-and-defend. One strategy we teach is called "STOP." This is an easy-to-remember four-step process (in short: Stop, Think, consider Options and consider Price or consequence) that encourages a young person to take a moment to think through their choices before acting. Though it's not always easy, when a young person remembers to STOP before reacting, they report that they are able to talk things through instead of fighting. The more they remember to practice STOP, the easier it gets.

Participants in the youth programs learn from each other, not just the adult trainers. Using "real life reflections" the students make connections between what they are learning and what they are experiencing in their daily lives. Parents or caregivers receive notes summarizing what the children are learning so they can reinforce the lessons at home.

In our Peer Mediation program, students from fourth grade through high school learn a lot of the same skills our adult mediators learn, so they can help others in talking through their differences and making conflict less stressful. Peer mediators try out their skills by role-playing, while an adult observes and coaches them on their progress. Within the school, a designated coordinator becomes a point person to work with the newly trained mediators, providing support and feedback. Empowering youths in this way has a beneficial ripple effect: Not only do the peer mediators learn useful skills, but allowing youth to mediate among their peers without adult intervention takes some of the pressure of consequence off, making it easier for kids to stay true to the process and come to their own agreements. Youths are still figuring out who they are as they go through their school-aged years, and this kind of training can be a path to helping kids become attentive and mindful adults.

For CDRC, educating young people by establishing the skills that allow constructive responses to conflict remains central to our mission. Conflicts can disrupt classroom learning, divide a student body, create problems for families and damage relationships. Left unaddressed or unresolved, conflicts can become more powerful and cause ever more damage by reinforcing a false idea that once caught in conflict, one cannot get free. By teaching the fourth 'r' — resolution — our young people can feel confident in their ability to communicate their needs and therefore be better prepared to succeed. In an exceedingly complex and demanding world, we teach kids that "talk works," which lets them move forward more freely and go after their dreams.

On Wednesday, April 23, at the Wings of Eagles Discovery Center in Horseheads, the Community Dispute Resolution Center is hosting "From Conflict to Cooperation: Youth Talking & Working It Out." Starting at 4:30 p.m., we'll have refreshments and entertainment provided by area students. The program will feature the premiere of a student-created video about conflict education that the fourth and fifth graders at Elmira's Beecher Elementary School have put together as well as special guest speaker Carl Hayden, chancellor emeritus of the state Board of Regents. The event will highlight the center's 25 years, as well as the good work of our staff, volunteer mediators and youth educators in Chemung County. All are welcome, but we especially encourage our friends in education and doing youth-centered community work to attend this wonderful gathering.

Editor's note: Community Dispute Resolution Center's monthly column will appear on the last Friday of each month in 2008. To suggest a column topic, contact Judy Saul (contact information below) or Andrew Tutino, The Journal's opinion page editor, at atutino@ithacajournal.com or 274-9213.

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