Strategies for Conflict Resolution Among Middle School Students

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Abstract

Though conflict is an inevitable component of interpersonal relationships, without appropriate conflict resolution skills, school students may experience social isolation and academic decline. This pattern can be particularly true in a middle school setting, where peer relationships have become the focal point of adolescent development. This article includes a rationale for the importance of middle school educators, school counselors, and administrators educating themselves regarding healthy conflict resolution for their students. The authors provide a brief summary of existing programs, such as peer mediation, conflict coaching, and psychoeducational training, to create a conflict resolution school climate. The authors conclude that while the current state of the literature is a promising starting point for the field, empirical validation of these models is needed; thus, they call for further outcome research to determine what the counseling field can truly call a “best practice” for facilitating healthy conflict management in middle school settings.

Keywords: conflict resolution, school counseling, middle school

Conflict, though an inevitable aspect of interpersonal relationships, can be managed in ways that yield healthy outcomes. When conflict occurs in middle school environments, students affected often lack the developmental maturity and interpersonal skills necessary to move toward healthy outcomes without guidance. Many professional educators are fostering the development of such skills by implementing school-based prevention focused on conflict resolution, peer mediation, and other options for decreasing or resolving the incidence of peer conflicts in a middle school environment (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, & Landry, 2000; Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson,
Conflict resolution skills can prove helpful in a middle school environment, where a lack of academic, social, and/or behavioral skills may lead to significant consequences for students in conflict, such as social isolation or academic decline. Conversely, students who exhibit competency in conflict resolution skills may be better able to adhere to the various academic and social demands as well as the peer norms that accompany adolescence (Kalberg, Lane, & Lambert, 2012).

**What Is Conflict?**

Conflict is commonly referred to as a disagreement of needs, motivations, wishes, and demands resulting from differing opinions in status, goals, values, perceptions, and sharing among individuals and groups (Ayas, Deniz, Kağan, & Kenç, 2010; Laursen & Pursell, 2009; Sülen Şahin, Serin, & Serin, 2011). For simplicity, conflict here will be defined generally as oppositions from both participants in a situation. Some types of conflict that may arise in a school environment include physical aggression, relational aggression, playground disputes, and emerging social conflicts over varying values and beliefs, among other things (Ayas et al., 2010). It should be noted that, in the literature, interpersonal conflicts are discussed as distinct constructs from the related constructs such as aggression, dominance, competition, and anger. Although verbal and physical aggression, dominance, competition, and anger often take place in the context of conflict, Laursen and Pursell (2009) suggested that they not be considered interpersonal conflict in isolated circumstances. In fact, friendships do not typically dissipate due to a single conflict episode, but chronic and consistent conflict does seem to have a great effect on friendship/relational quality (Laursen & Pursell, 2009). Regardless of definition used to characterize conflict, the consensus in the literature is that conflict in adolescence and within peer groups in a school environment can lead to relational bullying and intergroup exclusion.

**Why Does Conflict Occur?**

In attempting to gain greater understanding into the nature of conflict, practitioners often turn to foundational conflict principles. It is understood that humans make purposeful choices, that their motivations for each choice are intentional (Ayas et al., 2010) and that there are unfulfilled psychological needs underlying the roots of purposeful behavior (Maslow, 1943; Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton, & Bergen, 2012). Maslow asserted that people tend to meet their needs in a hierarchical manner, beginning with physiological needs and progressing upward through safety, love and belonging, self-esteem/self-respect, and finally reaching the ultimate goal of self-actualization. By applying this hierarchy to adolescent relationships in the middle school context, conflict can be examined through the lens of a personal need for social belonging that has gone unmet. This unmet need may manifest as one member of a peer group acting upon his/her frustration or prejudice in a way that demeans a peer, in order to increase status/power in the peer group where social belongingness is sought (Osterman, 2000). Maslow’s theory also states that those who have met this need of social belongingness may exhibit more self-actualizing tendencies, such as positive interactions with others; in the case of
adolescents, these interactions may lead to greater prosocial behavior, as defined by the middle school students themselves (Greener & Crick, 1999).

While motivation behind the conflict is situational, it is commonly accepted practice to resolve peer conflict sooner rather than later in order to detect and prevent bullying and other problematic behaviors (Cowie & Hutson, 2005). To that end, some strategies which school counselors can implement to detect and decrease peer conflict in middle school settings include peer mediation, school climate change through psychoeducational programs, and conflict coaching, all of which are outlined and discussed in this article.

**Strategies for Decreasing Peer Conflict in Middle School Settings**

**Peer Mediation**

The literature suggests that some typical educator responses to disruptive or violent peer conflict include punishment and seclusion. However, these adult actions do not necessarily teach students the appropriate tactics to manage their own conflicts more effectively (Turnuklu et al., 2009). Introducing more student-centered, preventative programs, such as a peer mediation program, in middle schools could allow for the resolution of the interpersonal conflicts, as well as the growth of the students’ interpersonal skills in the area of conflict resolution (Bell, Coleman, Anderson, Whelan, & Wilder, 2000). Peer mediation is defined as having a third party, student or faculty mediator, help disputants to resolve conflict through open communication and reach a mutual agreement regarding the situation at hand (Shahmohammadi, 2014; Sülen Şahin et al., 2011).

The Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation (CRPM) program is one such program that has been demonstrated to be effective when implementing peer mediation in middle school to assist school counselors with managing conflict resolution. Turnuklu et al. (2009) found that female mediators may be more effective due to the increased preference of female mediators in that study; however, mediator gender preference may be situational, depending on age and experiences of participants. Within the first few months of the school year, peer mediators should be trained in the specific types of conflict they may encounter and the different types of agreements that could be used. This program fosters student responsibility for their actions, while also providing them with the developmentally appropriate autonomy that is found to decrease aggressive orientation and hostile attribution; escalate healthy perspective taking; increase emotional awareness and management; improve problem-solving skills; and increase the use of constructive conflict behaviors in varying contexts, including schools, home, and the community. Without this guidance, students may take actions to resolve their conflict in unhealthy and ineffective ways such as physical aggression, verbal attacks, ‘the cold shoulder,’ or getting even (Turnuklu et al., 2009). According to the CRPM model, a hybrid approach, using a “cadre” and the “total student body,” seems to be an effective method and can be used across cultures (Turnuklu et al., 2009). This hybrid approach provides school-wide training in conflict resolution and peer mediation while allowing the student body to select individual peers to act as the peer mediators. Such an approach is further described as resulting in 98% resolution of the peer-mediated conflicts studied (Turnuklu et al., 2009).
School Climate Change via Psychoeducational Programs

An alternative to implementing specific strategies when conflict situations arise is establishing an overall school climate designed to decrease conflict and resolve it in healthy ways. The National School Climate Center (NSCC; 2015) suggested that school climate be defined as “the quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures” (para. 1). While school climate can embody many school norms, LaRusso and Selman (2011) identified four school climates specific to conflict resolution: survival-based climate, power-based climate, respect-based climate, and caring-based climate. Each type of school climate can be defined in the context of their names. A survival-based climate is categorized by high aggression. Students are concerned with their own safety, and the conflict that occurs typically resolves with unreflective, impulsive fight-or-flight responses. A power-based climate is categorized by some aggression and much concern for rules and having control. In this type of school climate, conflict is resolved with submission and one-way compliances. Respect-based climates demonstrate little aggression, concern with recognizing multiple viewpoints, equality, and resolution of conflicts with mutual communication and strategies. Finally, caring-based climates are concerned with the mutual well-being of everyone, maintaining social relationships, and using compromise and collaboration to solve conflict. Aggression is very rarely found in a caring-based school climate (LaRusso & Selman, 2011). The importance of school climate can be underestimated because the abstract concept of school norms can go unnoticed until problems arise. The NSCC (2015) empirically supports the importance of school climate by acknowledging increased teacher and student retention, decreased incidences of violence, and higher student achievement when school climate is positive.

School climate can be established through psychoeducational training sessions and programs for the school. An example of such a program is the Productive Conflict Resolution Program (PCRP). This program empowers students and teachers with the skills necessary to resolve conflict productively, develop emotional intelligence, create and uphold social justice, aid in the development of responsible citizenship, and create a caring and cooperative whole school environment (Kalberg et al., 2012). Instructional topics taught during the PCRP include understanding conflict, cooperation, conflict styles, valuing diversity, listening skills, emotional expression skills, problem solving, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Alternatively, Mura, Bonsignore, and Diamantini (2010) described a conflict resolution psychoeducational training program for students that promotes positive conflict management throughout the student body, in due course attempting to create a school environment in which not only teachers take part in actively diffusing conflict before it escalates, but students do so as well. An interactive training, including group discussions, workshops, and role playing, is implemented to provide techniques that will allow students to autonomously handle conflict resolution through communication, emotional skills, and negotiation skills (Mura et al., 2010).

Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching takes a different, more individualized, approach to conflict resolution. In fact, while the majority of conflict resolution strategies require both or all participants involved in the conflict, conflict coaching focuses on one participant and a
conflict resolution specialist (Brinkert, 2006). Conflict coaching can be used either in anticipation of a conflict or in making assessments of a situation that has already occurred (Brinkert, 2002). Most of the literature surrounding conflict coaching is within businesses and organizations; therefore, the use of conflict coaching in academic settings may be sparse. Despite the absence of literature for school conflict coaching, school counselors would be appropriately qualified to be considered conflict coaches. According to Brinkert (2002), effective conflict coaches are acknowledged as exhibiting above average confidence and self-awareness, concern for others, perspective taking, and verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Other components of the conflict coaching process that parallel a counseling session include establishing rapport, discussing limits of confidentiality, goal setting, fostering client understanding of interpersonal awareness and self-reflection, as well as autonomous problem solving. The counselor or conflict coach acts as a facilitator and expert on the situation and offers a different perspective as well as insight into the situation at hand (Brinkert, 2006). Conflict coaching may be preferable to clients who connect with sports or do not want to view the core issue as intrapersonal. The metaphor of coaching implies to the client that the conflict situation can be solved with an external focus, geared toward goals and success for the future using the client’s strengths.

The school counselor-coach can choose a type or framework for their coaching style. There are four approaches: interest-based, transformative, narrative, and conflict styles. Interest-based, problem-solving coaching focuses on negotiation. Transformative coaching focuses on client empowerment through the acknowledgement of self-strengths as well as the other disputant’s perspective. Narrative coaching focuses on the ways individuals use stories to gain an understanding of their lives. The stories are used to help make sense of how different stories can lead to conflict and subsequent resolution. Finally, conflict styles coaching determines the client’s conflict style using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1974) and explores conflict situations using that style. This approach is relatively structured and thus a model that novel coaches can learn easily (Brinkert, 2002). Once the counselor-coach has identified their approach for the particular participant, conflict coaching sessions run similar to a counseling session, however much more brief. The single session begins with introductions, gathering information and exploring perspectives and outcomes, and terminates with a reflective, summative exchange.

Another conflict coaching option to consider would be the CONFLICTALK instrument (Kimsey & Fuller, 2003). This instrument can be used to assess youth and adolescent conflict management message styles. The authors intend the instrument to be used as a tool for training in school-based, peer mediator and conflict management programs. The data collected on this instrument indicate that, when used in middle school settings, the scales used in CONFLICTALK measure typical responses to interpersonal and group conflicts and the construct validity, using factor analysis, suggests that CONFLICTALK discriminates three conflict styles: (1) adversarial, (2) collaborative, and (3) avoidance.

**Options for Underfunded Programs**

While the above strategies have been empirically supported as tools for addressing conflict resolution in middle schools, the distribution of resources, both
financial and human, can affect the availability of, training for, and implementation of formal strategy programs. Educators may not have the time or resources to begin implementing early aspects of programs, such as in-service training sessions, that provide proper training to school faculty in conflict resolution skills. In this case, school counselors may opt to run counseling groups centering on conflict resolution during the school year for students who need the assistance. Such programs, which promote coping with school-based conflict when delivered to the whole population, have been considered to represent a promising direction for the prevention of school-based conflict and violence escalation. Particularly recommended by practitioners in the field are groups that focus on student resiliency in the presence of conflict or victimization. By focusing on resiliency in student intra- and interpersonal relationships, school counselors are emphasizing the students’ own ability to move beyond a challenging event (Rose & Steen, 2014) as a preventative measure for negative emotional consequences associated with conflict and victimization. The Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model, as developed by Rose and Steen (2014), is one such specific group model that targets middle school students and focuses on student resiliency.

Another option would be to deliver programming designed to assist children and adolescents facing conflict to the whole middle school population. Frydenberg et al. (2004) detailed the need to implement programs through which we can teach adolescents such coping responses so that they may handle conflict more effectively. In addition to teaching better strategies, programs should also focus on the reduction of the use of non-productive coping skills. One such program was designed to increase coping resources in preadolescents through the modeling and teaching of optimistic thinking skills (Cunningham, Brandon, & Frydenberg, 2002). The results support the feasibility of middle school implementation of some low-cost, non-intrusive programs for students.

Call to the Profession

In recent years, middle school educators and practitioners have reported ever-growing concerns with conflicts that escalate to relational bullying, cyberbullying and physical altercations (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). It is no secret that the increasing violence and bullying in middle schools creates a school climate that can be both physically and psychologically unsafe for the students who are not necessarily developmentally ready to negotiate escalating conflict without intervention from school personnel. Though these challenges are well documented in the literature (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003), empirically validated interventions that are considered best practices are difficult to identify.

This brief review of the literature indicates that there are several promising programs aimed at resolving and/or preventing escalating conflict in middle schools. With so many options, it is difficult for practitioners to discern which, if any, would be considered ideal for a middle school environment; thus, we are a long way from declaring in our literature base a strategy that would be considered “best practice” in facilitating healthy conflict resolution in middle schools. It is hoped that researchers and practitioners will collect outcome data on some of the more promising options, such as peer mediation and school climate change. In addition to these middle school interventions, researchers may wish to explore preventative options such as creating a positive school climate.
surrounding conflict resolution in early elementary school, where there may be greater possibility of facilitating preventative action against maladaptive conflict behaviors in middle school. For both populations, further research is needed.

When we expand beyond traditional educational research, we find that the business and psychology literature is ripe with starting points, as authors report strategies used in groups of adults (Dechurch, Hamilton, & Haas, 2007), businesses (Simons & Peterson, 2000), team building (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochim, 2008), couples counseling (Mackey, Diemer, & O’Brien, 2000), and even graduate education in conflict resolution (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010). While we can learn from these findings, it is important for school counselors to collect data in support of specific strategies to be used in middle school conflict resolution plans. Working together, school counselors can develop conflict-specific curriculum for group counseling as well as collect efficacy and summative data following the program implementation. It is hoped that researchers in the field will collect the data necessary to lend support to the programs outlined in this brief review of the options.

References


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