often, students who are “troublemakers” turn out to be the best mediators. Many programs have a required conflict resolution course sometime during the middle school years. Training is done by teachers, counseling staff, or outside consultants, and ranges from the semester-long course (15-20 hours of training), to a two-day workshop for middle or high school students, to a three-hour workshop for elementary students. Through discussion and role play, students learn conflict resolution skills such as active listening, cooperation in achieving a goal, acceptance of differences, problem-solving, anger management, and methods of maintaining neutrality as a mediator. They also practice the structured mediation process they will be following in actual dispute resolution.

The mediation session

Elementary mediators usually work in teams, visiting designated school areas and responding to signs of antagonism between students as they arise. They will approach the disputants, ask if they need help, and take them aside for mediation, if the students agree. Middle and high school programs may employ resident mediators in the cafeteria or public areas, using a more formal procedure for students to refer themselves or others for mediation. There is usually a separate mediation room or rooms set up to facilitate private communication among the disputants and the mediator.

It is essential that disputants voluntarily agree to participate in mediation, and ground rules for the process prohibit name-calling or interrupting someone who is talking.

Success of peer mediation programs

It is difficult to measure the success of peer mediation programs. Almost all teachers and administrators report that their programs are extremely successful, and that they perceive a more positive climate and see less destructive behavior in the school. When measuring success in reaching or maintaining agreement between disputants, rates vary between 58-93%. A few studies show reductions in suspension rates, suspension rates for fighting, or incidence of fighting by as much as 50%. Even elementary students learn and retain the knowledge of conflict resolution techniques, and those who participate in mediation, either as mediators or as disputants, benefit from the experience. The NAME found that peer mediation programs reduce the amount of teacher and administrator time spent on discipline, reduce violence and crime in schools, and increase the self-esteem and academic achievement of students trained as mediators.

One critical factor in the success of peer mediation programs is the active support of the school principal, and in some cases of the local community. A comprehensive planning process is necessary to outline goals and administrative accountability for each phase of the program. Provision for the ongoing support of the peer mediators is especially important. At minimum, a weekly meeting should be held for the students to debrief, engage in guided reflection, and receive continued training.

One of the reasons for the success of peer mediation is the fact that it is student run. Children and adolescents build a culture of positive peer pressure within which they can begin to establish independence from adult guidance. When given the opportunity, they are capable of using their own judgment to creatively solve disputes, and often their solutions are less punitive than those of adults. Research shows that children’s solutions to conflict are more aggressive when adults are present. As children grow older they rely increasingly on their peers as models and measures of correct behavior. The potential judgment of peers during the mediation process may have a higher degree of moral significance to a teen than would the same judgment coming from an adult. In peer mediation, students have the opportunity to conform to positive social standards without sacrificing their identification with the peer group.

See also Conflict resolution

Further Reading

Further Information
American Bar Association. Special Committee on Dispute Resolution, 1800 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036.
Educators for Social Responsibility, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 450, New York, NY 10115.
National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME). 205 Hampshire House, Box 33635, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003–3635, (413) 545–2462.
School Initiatives Program. Community Board Center for Policy and Training, 149 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.
School Mediation Associates. 702 Green Street #8, Cambridge, MA 02139.
Peer pressure

The influence of the social group on an individual.

Peers are the individuals with whom a child or adolescent identifies, who are usually but not always of the same age-group. Peer pressure occurs when the individual experiences implicit or explicit persuasion, sometimes amounting to coercion, to adopt similar values, beliefs, and goals, or to participate in the same activities as those in the peer group.

Although it is usually conceived of as primarily a negative influence acting on adolescents or teens, peer pressure can be a positive influence as well, and it can act on children at any age, depending on their level of contact with others. The influence of peer pressure is usually addressed in relation to the relative influence of the family on an individual. Some characteristics that peer groups offer and which families may be lacking are: (1) a strong belief structure; (2) a clear system of rules; and (3) communication and discussion about taboo subjects such as drugs, sex, and religion.

Peer pressure is strongly associated with level of academic success, drug and substance use, and gender role conformity. The level of peer influence increases with age, and resistance to peer influence often declines as the child gains independence from the family or caretakers, yet has not fully formed an autonomous identity. One study in particular confirms other research findings that the values of the peer group with whom the high schooler spends the most time are a stronger factor in the student’s level of academic success than the values, attitudes, and support provided by the family. Compared to others who started high school with the same grades, students whose families were not especially supportive but who spent time with an academically oriented peer group were successful, while those students whose families stressed academics but who spent time with peers whose orientation was not academic performed less well.

The peer pressure study contradicts prevailing ideas about the influence of families on the success of racial and cultural minorities such as Asians and African Americans. While some Asian families were not especially involved in their children’s education, the students, who found little social support of any type, tended to band together in academic study groups. Conversely, African American students, whose families tended to be highly involved in and supportive of education, were subjected to intense peer pressure not to perform academically. According to the study, the African American peer groups associated the activities of studying and spending time at the library with “white” behavior, and adopted the idea that the student who gets good grades, participates in school activities, or speaks Standard English is betraying his racial heritage and community. Consequently, gifted students “dumb-down” as they make the choice between academics and “fitting in.” Research suggests that this type of peer pressure contributes to a decline in the grades of African American students (especially males) as early as the first through fourth grades.

Peer pressure similarly compels students of all ethnic backgrounds to engage in other at-risk behaviors such as cigarette smoking, truancy, drug use, sexual activity, fighting, theft, and daredevil stunts. Again, peer group values and attitudes influence, more strongly than do family values, the level of teenage alcohol use. Regardless of the parenting style, peer pressure also influences the degree to which children, especially girls, conform to expected gender roles. Up until about grade six, girls’ performance in science and math are on par with that of boys, but during adolescence girls’ test scores and level of expressed interest declines. The tendency is to abandon competition with boys in favor of placing more emphasis on relationships and on physical appearance.

Ideally the child, adolescent, or teen should make decisions based on a combination of values internalized from the family, values derived from thinking independently, and values derived from friends and other role models. In order to achieve this balance, rather than attempting to minimize peer influence, families and schools must provide strong alternative beliefs, patterns of behavior, and encourage formation of peer groups that engage in positive academic, athletic, artistic, and social activities.

Hallie Bourne

Further Reading

Wilder Graves Penfield

1891-1976
American-born Canadian neurosurgeon who diagnosed the cause of epilepsy and perfected a surgical cure.