In life, conflict is unavoidable. It occurs between two people, between groups, and even within an individual. Conflict is everywhere - in schools, organizations, marriages, and a plethora of other places, relationships, and age groups. How the conflict is handled, whether positively or negatively, is the main concern regarding the outcome of the particular conflict (McFarland, 1992). In the past, conflict has been viewed as negative and not beneficial to the counseling relationships as well as other relationships (McClellan & Russo, 1992); however, more recently conflict is increasingly being perceived as normal and facilitative of growth (Mitchell & Mitchell, 1984).

The following is a review of current literature (1982 - present) on conflict resolution. The search for current literature was taken from ERIC and PSYCHLIT on CD-ROM during 1982-3/1994. Psychological Abstracts, Educational Index, Review in Education, and Carl Ulmer Periodical Index in the mainframe of a southern university. The words used in the computer search were conflict resolution, conflict resolution and theories, conflict resolution and counseling or psychotherapy or therapy and conflict resolution and techniques. Included in the areas of conflict studies are child conflict, and adolescence conflict.

There are however, some underlying themes of conflict that have been noted by Deutsch (1994), which are common to both areas. These themes include:

1. The majority of conflicts in which parties are involved have a combination of motives, and contain both cooperative and competitive interests.
2. Conflict can be both constructive and destructive.
3. Cooperative and competitive interests have two directions of conflict resolution. There are distinctive strategies, techniques, and tactics for dealing with conflict within each orientation.
4. The relative strengths of the cooperative and competitive interests within the conflicting parties will determine the nature of the conflict process and its outcome.
Areas of Conflict

Several techniques have been developed for use with children in resolving conflict (Arrington, 1987; Edelson, 1981; McClure, Miller, & Russo, 1982; Williams, 1989). The majority of techniques are based on the observation that children do not have the verbal, communication skills necessary to verbally express their conflicting feelings and thoughts; they are physical, and express themselves in physical ways (Arrington, 1987).

Conflict resolution skills have also been taught successfully in a group environment. This has proven effective because it allows for children to interact with their peers. Edelson (1981) mentions that groups can present situations more similar to the real world and can offer a wider variety of activities for teaching effective conflict resolution.

In dealing with children in a group setting conflict is inevitable and it is important to know how to control the conflict and maximize learning for those involved. McClure et al. (1992), lists five developmental stages that all groups progress through: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. The stage that is most important is the storming stage because this is where the children will set the stage for how to react, communicate, and resolve conflict for the remainder of the group (McClure et al., 1992). In children's groups, as in adult groups, the members confront the leader to establish the structure of the group. Because children have not developed the necessary verbal skills to express their feelings, conflict is displayed physically.

An important technique discussed by Edelson (1981) is what he calls "Readiness Activities." This includes role playing and allowing the children to act out how they feel within a group setting. McClure et al. (1992) also addressed the need to allow children physical movement. While members have their turn playing out their role everyone else is in the group observes. The children then make suggestions on how to best handle the situation and give feedback to those who are role playing. In addition, Edelson (1981) suggests giving small assignments between sessions to familiarize them with the concepts of homework. After the "Readiness Activities" the children are ready to begin the actual "Skills Training" (Edelson, 1981).

The technique of writing has also been effective in the classroom (e.g., Williams, 1989) because it allows children to learn to express themselves and given them time to think about a given situation. In the skills training described by Edelson (1981), the children write down their problems and reactions to the problems. After the problems and current solutions have been written down, the children then present the problem to the group to brainstorm. Then the children discuss the possible solutions and consequences involved. Role playing allows them an avenue in which they can try out their solutions and retry others.

As children get accustomed to the idea of how the process works, they are allowed to lead the group. They are given a sequence card listing the problem observation, brainstorming, and feedback response. Allowing the children to lead the group helps the children to generalize the problem-solving and conflict resolution process to the "real" world. By teaching children how to verbalize their feelings, they are better able to resolve conflict without resorting to fighting, verbal criticism, or avoidance (McClure et al., 1992).

Adolescent Conflict

Conflict can be seen in the public high schools across the nation. Several techniques have been developed for use with adolescents in an attempt to teach conflict resolution skills (Coffman, 1988; Facetti & Hagerstrand, 1987; Lyon, 1991; Zhang, 1994).

In an empirical study conducted by Zhang (1994), the intervention model of constructive
Resolution and cooperative learning were implemented and tested in three high schools. One high school received training in constructive conflict resolution. Another high school received both constructive conflict resolution and cooperative learning. The last high school received only cooperative learning.

The constructive conflict resolution training consisted of four general areas of instruction: violence prevention, basic negotiation skills, application of negotiation skills, and basic mediation skills (Zhang, 1994). The cooperative learning technique used required the implementation of four elements: positive interdependence (the students must perceive that they "sink or swim together"); individual accountability for mastering the material; skills needed to analyze how the group can improve cooperation (Zhang, 1994). The results of the study showed improvement in conflict management by increased social support, decreased victimization, enhanced positive life attitudes, and a sense of personal control over one's fate with the implementation of constructive conflict resolution.

In another study, adolescents who had been in several fights in the past, but who were showing signs of improvement were assigned to an eight-week workshop to teach conflict resolution (Lyon, 1991). Each student wrote down responses, relations, and feelings to various conflicts. Everyone then role-played each situation. Following each scenario the group discussed the role play and answered a questionnaire about conflict to help the counselor understand the students' individual attitudes. The counselor then began modeling less drastic solutions to each scenario. Role reversals, skills, and simulations were techniques used to teach conflict resolution. The students were also taught how to evaluate verbal and nonverbal communication. After the workshop, each student met with the counselor for follow-up sessions once a week for four weeks.

A main observation made by Lyon (1991) was that a major commitment must be made between students and counselors if the program is to be successful.

A successful mediation team was implemented at Mt. Diablo High School (Fumo & Hagerstrand, 1987). Talking to the peer mediation teams was an alternative for students facing suspension. All students participating received 20 hours of training at the following areas: communication skills including attending, squaring, eye contact, and reflective and active listening; non-threatening techniques; decoding verbal and nonverbal messages; use of open ended questioning; refraining from blocking; feeling questions; problem-solving; examining feelings; brainstorming; and generating multiple solutions. Results reveal that with the implementation of the teams, the high school went from being the lowest ranked high school in terms of suspensions and fighting to the most in being average in the district. Coffman (1988) has presented a conflict resolution strategy for those adolescents whose parents are divorced. The strategy is divided into four sessions of 50 minutes. During the first session the person needs to admit that a conflict exists, realize what resolution style is being used, and become less impulsive in managing conflict (Coffman, 1988). In subsequent sessions the following guidelines were presented:

1. Describe the situation as he or she sees it.
2. Describe the feelings regarding the conflict.
3. Formulate and describe a situation acceptable to everyone.
4. Agree upon the desired changes necessary.
5. Construct a detailed agenda with follow-up plans and specific dates for accomplishing the activities (Coffman, 1988).

Implication for Counselors

Skills Needed in Constructive Conflict Resolution

Counselors, mediators, therapists, and any-
one else who is involved as a third party in the resolution of conflicts should posses four sets of skills according to Deutsch (1994). The first set of skills are those related to the third party’s (i.e. the counselor) establishing a working relationship with each of the conflicting parties so that they will trust the counselor, communi- cate freely with him/her, and be responsive to her/his suggestions regarding an orderly process for negotiations. The second set of skills are those related to establishing and maintain- ing a cooperative problem-solving attitude among the conflicting parties towards their con- flict. The third set of skills are those needed in facilitating the group process and the teaching of decision making skills. Finally, the fourth set of skills involves the knowledge of issues sur- rounding conflict in general. Not only does the counselor need to be well trained in the above set of skills, but also in the teaching of these skills to clients so that clients can resolve future conflict themselves in the future. Deutsch (1994), in his work at the Interna- tional Center for Cooperating and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College in New York City, has observed several factors worth noting about the teaching of conflict resolution skills. These factors are:

1. An important change in behavior is unlikely to occur from the training unless there is emphasis on skills (Deutsch, 1994). Teach- ing the knowledge is not enough; repeated practice using the skills in a variety of circum- stances while being observed and corrected by a qualified person is needed to help reinforce the successful use of the skills. A knowledge of the principles plus the practice are needed to generalize to everyday situations. It is also helpful, as noted by Lyon (1991), that there exists a strong relationship between the counselor and the client. In addition, extensive follow-up will increase the likelihood of greater generalization (Lyon, 1991).

2. The social and cognitive skills involved in constructive conflict resolution are funda- mentally different than those involved in effective physical activities (Deutsch, 1994). In tennis, one gets immediate visual feedback if one serves poorly. Whereas, especially in conflict, the feedback is not immediate; people do not ask whether or not the proper meaning of the message was communicated, it is assumed. In order for students to develop conflict resolution skills it is necessary for them to become aware of their existing techniques and motivations. They need a good model in which they can compare existing skills.

Then, through modeling, and feedback the new model will become internalized and become natural. Further, it is necessary for the student to be trained in the skills of giving clear feedback to the others with whom one is in conflict (Deutsch, 1994). By doing this, the student will be able to know how they are progressing in applying constructive resolution skills in daily situations.

3. The constructive use of conflict resolution skills is more likely if the social consent is favorable to their use (Deutsch, 1994). For individuals to use their skills in unfavor- able social contexts one would need to be able to step “outside” of the context and weigh the personal risk.

Final Points to Consider

An important point gleaned from this review is that several of the studies reported a more significant gain in conflict resolution skills when affect was dealt with and seen as impor- tant (Johnson & Greenberg, 1955). The improvements also tended to be generalised and lasted for long periods of time.

When working with children, it is impor- tant to remember that they do not have the verbal capabilities necessary for complete verbal expression of their feelings. It is helpful if they are given a physical outlet to express emo- tions, role playing has been found to be helpful.
Conflict Resolution... 

References


