

Research Guide

College and Career Competency: *Conflict Management*

Definition:

Conflict is a term used to describe a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, or goals. While manifestations of conflict can range from minor disagreements to physical violence, conflict is a natural part of human interaction. Along with sharing or competing for limited resources, conflict can occur because of individual or group differences in rank, objectives, views, or traditions (Ayas, Deniz, Kağan, & Kenç, 2010). Conflict management is the art of lessening tensions or resolving problems that arise among individuals or groups at variance with one another.

Essential Components for Students:

1. Understand your natural response to conflict.
2. Understand the context of the conflict, including the perspectives of all involved.
3. Apply a conflict management approach that is appropriate to the situation.

Research:

- Experts say that constructive conflict among students should occur frequently, that it is psychologically healthy, and that it can have many positive effects. These effects include bringing attention to issues, encouraging self-reflection, making relationships stronger, and improving students' abilities to work through hardships under stress (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). As a study by Ubinger, Handal and Massura (2013) notes, adolescents who engage in conflict resolution report a greater satisfaction with life and exhibit fewer symptoms of psychological distress than adolescents who avoid conflict.
- The way that students approach conflict can be constructive or destructive. An example of a constructive conflict approach is cooperation with the opposing party, and an example of a destructive approach is physical aggression. Research suggests that rising violence rates in schools can be attributed to conflict that was not resolved in a constructive way in a timely fashion (Ayas et al., 2010).
- Two leading experts in constructive conflict resolution programs, David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, insist that students must receive conflict resolution training for an extended period of time before they are able to effectively resolve interpersonal conflicts. The benefits of this type of model include increased academic achievement, improved retention of subject matter, and healthier relationships with others. Studies also show that training is most successful when integrated with school subjects that inherently deal with conflict such as literature, history, and science (Johnson & Johnson, 2004) and that this integration contributes to students' academic success (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, & Laginski, 1997).
 - A psychosocial intervention program called ABLE (Attribution, Behavior, Life skills Education) has been successful in improving students' "self-concept" by developing conflict resolution skills (Hay, Byrne, & Butler, 2000). The program is built on research conducted by educational psychologist Herbert W. Marsh, who developed the 102-item

Self Description Questionnaire II (SDQ-II) self-assessment, which measures adolescents' self-concept in relation to 11 "self-domains," shown below (Ingles et al., 2012).

SDQ-II	Description
Physical abilities (PA)	Skills and interest in sports and physical activities.
Physical Appearance (PP)	Physical attractiveness.
Parent Relations (PR)	Interaction with parents.
Honesty/trustworthiness (HT)	Truthfulness and dependability.
Emotional Stability (ES)	Emotional well being and freedom from psychopathology.
Math (M)	Ability, enjoyment, and interest in mathematics and reasoning.
Verbal (V)	Ability, enjoyment, and interest in Spanish and reading.
General School (GS)	Ability, enjoyment and interest in school subjects.
General Self (GF)	Self-worth, self-confidence and self-satisfaction.
Opposite-sex relations (OS)	Interaction with peers of the opposite sex.
Same-sex relations (SS)	Interaction with peers of the same sex.

Adapted from Ingles et al., 2012, p.394

- A study conducted with 40 ninth-grade students showed that after incorporating conflict resolution training in an English literature class through the study of a novel, students were more likely to compromise with others and negotiate solutions when dealing with conflicts. They also understood the information presented in the book in a more insightful way than the students in the control group (Stevahn et al., 1997).
- A meta-analysis of 16 studies measuring the impact of a conflict resolution skills training program integrated in English literature and history classes showed that students who participated in the program did better than students in the control group on examinations testing **knowledge** of the course materials (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). *See more on this program in the "Instructional Strategies" section.*
- Effective conflict management training may require consideration of contributing demographic variables and individual child characteristics. For example, one study found that gender played a role in how 430 secondary school students dealt with four different types of conflict: being made fun of, cursing, taking someone else's belongings without consent, and physical violence. Girls mostly used cooperative and avoidance strategies, while boys leaned towards cooperative and destructive strategies. The paper suggests that the boys' upbringing may be responsible for their aggressive conflict management style and the authors call for training students' families to take part in mediation procedures (Ayas et al., 2010).
- A study by D'Oosterlinck and Broekaert (2003) acknowledges the importance of having positive conflict management models and interventions in place to support students with emotional and behavioral needs in general education classrooms. According to the authors, employing a program such as Teaching Students to be Peacemakers (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, as cited in D'Oosterlinck & Broekaert, 2003, p. 222) can provide students with the behavioral tools they need to work through differences with their classmates.
- Granting students larger roles in conflict resolution programs can be beneficial to the success of the programs. This gives students the opportunity to help themselves and their peers.
 - Participating as trained peer mediators in school-run conflict resolution programs such as Winning Against Violent Environments (WAVE) enabled students to resolve conflicts in their own lives (Bickmore, 1993), which led to their development of important life skills including **communication**, **leadership**, negotiation, and **decision making** (Close & Lechman, 1997).

- Programs teaching kids conflict management skills in an effort to reduce rates of violence in schools are more effective when designed with consideration for students' varying cognitive skill levels and the differences in students' thinking as compared with adults' thinking. Adolescents are skilled decision-makers who simply hold a different perspective on interpersonal conflicts (e.g., a student may choose to engage in a physical fight to defend his/her reputation), and understanding this difference is important in helping kids deal with conflict constructively (Haynie, Alexander, & Walters, 1997).
- Studies show that destructive conflict at home or within the family unit can damage the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of adolescents and lead to numerous behavioral problems, including an inability to negotiate disagreements calmly with their peers (Bradford et al., 2004; Cummings, Koss, & Davies, 2015). Adolescent behavior can also be adversely affected by a lack of emotional support from parents or other adult caregivers. Programs that teach parents and other family members how to effectively communicate with children and provide support for academic success and positive social behaviors are effective in guiding children towards positive **decision making** in school and in their interactions with their peers (Molnar, Roberts, Browne, Gardener, & Buka, 2005).
- Unlike other types of conflict between peers, bullying is the unprovoked and persistent psychological or physical abuse of an individual by another person (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Recent studies show that traditional intervention programs such as peer mediation strategies are not as effective in combating bullying as school-wide programs such as the widely implemented Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, which involves parents, teachers, and bystanders in reshaping the school culture (Christensen, 2008).
 - Research-backed components of successful bullying prevention programs include: distributing a school-wide anti-bullying policy to students, school staff, and parents; administering a needs assessment to help inform school staff about the frequency and effects of bullying; and using both classroom-level interventions, such as discussions about bullying and the responsibility of the bystander, and school-level interventions, such as enforcing policies to address the needs of the school (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

Assessment:

- “Crucial Conversations: Getting Started” is a participant packet used at a Girl Scout learning and development conference (Girl Scouts of the USA, 2011) available at http://gsuniv.org/wp-content/uploads/Crucial_Conversations_Getting_Started_participant_packet.pdf that includes a conflict management style assessment. The packet also provides more detail on each of the conflict management styles, framing them in the context of crucial conversations.
- The Conflict Management Styles Assessment (Adkins, 2006) is a 15-item self-assessment survey to determine preferred conflict management styles: accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, competing, and compromising. It is available for free with the scoring guide at <http://irem.org/File%20Library/ChapterServices/ConflictManagementWS/ActivityConflictManagementStylesAssessment.pdf> (IREM, 2013).
- Kilmann & Thomas (1977) built on the seminal work by Blake and Mouton (1970) that identified five conflict management styles or modes: accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, competing, and compromising. The Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) measures participants' responses to conflict situations to determine their conflict management styles. As a conflict style inventory, the TKI employs forced-choice responses to 30 pairs of statements. It can be purchased for \$17.95 at <https://www.cpp.com/products/tki/index.aspx>.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a compendium (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005) containing a variety of useful tools for measuring and assessing students' conflict resolution skills, negative behaviors, and attitudes. Below are a few examples of tools that you can find within this collection that could aid in assessing students' conflict resolution skills. We have cited the original authors of these assessment tools. You can find the compendium on the CDC website:
http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/YV_Compendum.pdf.
 - The "Aggression—Problem Behavior Frequency Scale" (p. 181) measures how often adolescents engage in three types of aggressive behaviors: physical aggression, non-physical aggression, and relational aggression. The questionnaire instructs respondents to report the number of times that they have exhibited specific aggressive behaviors under each of the three categories in the last 30 days (Dahlberg et al., 2005). This scale can help teachers identify at-risk students who require conflict resolution training.
 - The "Attitude Toward Conflict" (p. 25) measure is an eight-item questionnaire that measures respondents' attitudes about using violence to deal with conflicts (Lam, 1989). This measure can help teachers identify the students that are most inclined to turn to violence to resolve conflicts.
 - The "Conflict Resolution-Individual Protective Factors Index" (p. 196) is a 12-item questionnaire that measures respondents' conflict resolution skills in two areas: self-control and cooperation (Phillips & Springer, 1992). Administering this questionnaire to students can help teachers understand their students' skill levels and plan interventions accordingly.
- The CDC also released a compendium (Hamburger, Basile, & Vivolo, 2011) containing a variety of tools to measure experiences and attitudes related to bullying. Below are some examples provided in the collection. You can find the compendium at:
<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullycompendium-a.pdf>.
 - The "My Life in School" checklist (p. 19) is a 40-item measure that assesses students' social experience when interacting with their peers in school throughout the course of one week (Arora & Thompson, 1987). Students read statements such as, "This week another child called me names" and select the frequency of the event from the choices of "Never," "Once," or "More than once."
 - The "Student School Survey" (p. 106) is a 70-item survey that asks students to rate their sense of safety in their school and among their peers as well as their feelings about themselves in relation to their peers (Williams & Guerra, 2007). The survey also measures students' understanding of right and wrong behavior in bullying situations.

Instructional Practices:

- Guide students towards using cooperative conflict management strategies. For example, when students work towards satisfying both themselves and the disagreeing party, they engage in cooperative activities such as "seeking opportunities of agreement, showing mutual trust, searching solutions for common goodness, establishing **empathy** with the other, [and] trying to understand and to be understood" (Ayas et al., 2010).
 - According to Crawford and Bodine (1996), educators can employ a six-step conflict resolution procedure in class with students during practice exercises: "(1) Set the stage, (2) gather perspectives, (3) identify interests, (4) create options, (5) evaluate options, and (6) generate agreement" (p. 12). Complete information about this procedure is available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/conflic.pdf>.

- This lesson plan (Discovery, 2014), originally designed for young adolescents (grades 6 through 8), encourages students to reflect on how they behave when dealing with conflicts as they brainstorm conflict resolution strategies for dealing with hurtful acts committed by others. The lesson plan is available at <http://www.discoveryeducation.com/teachers/free-lesson-plans/resolving-conflicts.cfm>.
- Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) recommends the Peaceable Classroom model for teaching conflict management, among other important student development subjects. This website contains activities, lessons, and vocabulary for all age levels that teachers can use to help teach conflict management skills (Teacher Vision, 2014). See these links for more information:
 - http://www.creducation.org/resources/resolving_conflicts/files/day3.html
 - http://www.creducation.org/cre/homebase/content_presentations/cre_peaceable_proven_impacts/
 - http://www.creducation.org/resources/resolving_conflicts/files/index.html
- Integrate conflict management training in standard classes already taught to students. This will promote regular practice, which will enable effective retention of skills and empower students to **self-regulate** their behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).
 - Teaching Students to be Peacemakers (TSP) is an example of a program that can be easily integrated into a standard class curriculum (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). Students learn conflict resolution in four stages: (1) mediation techniques, (2) compromise through a six-step negotiation process, (3) mediate conflicts between their peers, and (4) practice being mediators (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).
- Collaborate with other school staff to develop or improve the bullying prevention policy and share it with all members of the school community.
 - Engage students in an anti-bullying campaign by asking students to take bullying experience surveys. Be sure to consider the survey results when developing an intervention program or implementing a school-wide, research-based bullying prevention program like the Olweus Bullying Prevention. More information about the Olweus Bullying Prevention program can be found at www.violencepreventionworks.org/public/bullying.page. (Hazelden Foundation, 2015).
- Role playing can be an effective strategy for teaching effective communication. The Department of Labor provides a resource on developing communication skills in youth (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/communication.pdf>) that includes some role play activities. For example, the teacher can ask for two volunteers to act in a short skit about a summer job. One student role plays “Jade,” whose summer job is mowing lawns, and the other student role plays “Mr. Z” who is the client. The skit revolves around Jade receiving negative feedback from Mr. Z. At the end of the skit, students are asked to answer a number of questions related to the interaction between Jade and Mr. Z.
- Through its *Speaking in the Disciplines* site, the University of Pittsburgh outlines six types of oral communication activities and offers a number of useful instructor and student resources for classroom application, including works addressing argumentation and **conflict management**. While these activities are designed for college-level students, they can be adapted to a high school classroom. Complete details are available at <http://www.speaking.pitt.edu/about/oral-comm.html>
- Nonverbal communication is an important aspect of **conflict management**. Recognizing this fact, researchers at the Conflict Resolution Education Connection developed a complete unit for

training adolescents to recognize and master many aspects of nonverbal communication. The unit is available at www.creducation.org/resources/Core_Nonverbal_Comm_Concepts.doc.

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