Believe it or not, part of the joy of working with the children in my classroom is working together with them at issues of discipline. Just about every situation that is a conflict of some sort can be used as a teachable moment in our life together.

Rather than trying to punish individuals for their misconduct, we decided that the problem was really the system we had for getting jobs. We put aside our other plans in order to work this problem out. In our class meeting we went through a conflict resolution process that included a time for recognizing the injustices that had been experienced, a time for making any necessary restitution (in this case, a number of apologies were made and accepted), and a time for looking at what we could do to solve the problem so it would not happen in the future.

“Future intentions” is probably our favorite part of the process because we can be very creative. All suggestions were recorded on the chalkboard. When we ran out of ideas, we went back and checked each suggestion to see if it was respectful, related, restorative, and reasonable. We eliminated any that did not meet our criteria. Using consensus, we decided on a solution that seemed like it would really work well for us.

Our solution was one that called for a random drawing of numbers each morning to decide your place in line and a rule that you could only do a job once a week unless no one else wanted to do it. Finally, we set a trial period and a follow-up meeting date to determine whether or not this agreement was working well. We continue to use this plan with a few modifications. The whole process took about 30 minutes and it solved the problem so well that we have not had to spend any more time on it. A conflict resolution process is very efficient.

To solve interpersonal problems we use a very similar process that does not involve the entire class but only the persons having the problem and two peer mediators. This takes a great deal of pressure off me to be the powerful controller, or the judge and jury for every dispute that occurs. The fact that all of the children know the process saves enormous amounts of time because as they become more and more experienced and see it modeled as much as possible by me, they become better able to solve problems between them without me or the peer mediators. There are fewer incidents of one person coming to “tell” on another because they know that “telling” will result in a mediation that involves them and whoever else is involved. “Telling” is transformed as much as possible into asking for help to solve a problem that they have been unable to solve themselves. We learn to view this as positive. Now the person who has “told” is transformed from a tattletale into a constructive problem solver who is bringing a problem to our attention that can be mediated. The problem will get solved and the peer mediators have a chance to practice their skills. Sometimes the problem is worked on right away and sometimes we agree on a later time that is more convenient for all who are involved. Even if the feelings are quite intense, this act of setting a

The whole process took about 30 minutes and it solved the problem so well that we have not had to spend any more time on it. A conflict resolution process is very efficient.

*This description and the model it refers to were co-developed with Ron Claassen of the Center for Conflict Studies & Peacemaking, Fresno (CA) Pacific College.
time helps to calm the feelings so
the persons involved can work on
other things until the meeting.

Intense feelings can flare up when
you least expect it. Having a struc-
ture in place to handle this really
empowers the children to be in con-
trol of themselves. John was sud-
denly chasing Nasario around the
classroom. The chase ended when
Nasario caught up with John and hit
him with the book he had in his
hand. We quickly recognized that
there was a problem here that
needed to be solved. We were in the
middle of a project that they also
needed to be involved in so I asked
them if they would be willing to
discuss the problem after lunch with
the peer mediators. They agreed
and went back to their parts of the
project. If they had not agreed, we
would have continued to negotiate
what we would do. My preference if
for them to agree to mediation, but if
they will not agree to mediation and
to be cooperative, they know that the
problem will go into the larger
school system that allows them very
little say in the solution.

The peer mediators met with
Nasario and John after lunch and
took them through a process that
starts with each person describing
what had happened while the other
person listens well enough to be
able to repeat what they have heard.
The injustices both had experienced
began at recess during a football
game. Nasario felt John was not
including him in the game enough
because he had not thrown the ball
to him several times when he was
open. They exchanged angry words
on the way back to class that
escalated to each of them calling
each other a name. John was very
surprised when Nasario had been so
angry with him after recess. He had
not deliberately left Nasario out of
the game and had not really thought
that much about whether or not he
was open. He told Nasario right
away that he was sorry for not
seeing him and Nasario apologized
for getting so angry.

The discussion turned to what they
could both do to keep this from hap-
pening again. The decided to
“check things out better” before
getting mad and to be sure to throw
the ball to each other at least once
the next time they were out playing
football. A follow-up meeting was
scheduled for two days later to see
how things were going and whether
or not they were keeping their
agreement. John and Nasario joined
the rest of us proudly. They had
solved their problem and were ready
to be contributing members of our
community again. The mediators
returned proudly as well. They had
helped facilitate a constructive
process that had restored a
relationship.

It was very exciting when, a few
weeks ago, three girls in my room
declared, “Mrs. Claassen, we had a
problem, and we were really mad at
each other, but we talked about it
and solved it ourselves!” They
recognized that they had been able
to do something worthwhile and
valuable and they were enjoying the
feeling of empowerment that
brought to them. We celebrated by
sharing how it had all happened.

Sometimes the process seems to me
to be too simple to be of that much
value. But again and again the stu-
dents come up with creative solu-
tions that continue to teach me that
they prefer to be helpful and con-
structive in their dealings with one
another. The challenge is to
continue to provide them with the
structure that allows them to do this.
This is not that difficult in my own
classroom but it becomes more of a
challenge in the larger school
context. While the process has
proven its worth to those of us who
have also been involved in victim-
offender reconciliation and other
mediation situations, it is actually
very new and different from the
usual school structures for handling
problems. Finding the time to train
and be available for my older, whole
school mediators can be very
difficult. It is the satisfaction that I
sense from the students after they
have had an opportunity to mediate

These students have joined in a
vision for working towards
restoration rather than separation. I
believe they are already contributing
a great deal to creating peace in our
world.

Together that keeps me looking for
ways to continue.

When a first grader came to his
teacher to tell her that a third grader
had been making him throw away
his breakfast tray or he would “beat”
him up, she decided to refer the boys
to peer mediation because she knew
that they had been friends in the
past. After meeting with the
mediators, two eighth graders who
led them through the process, they
were able to walk down the hall
together with renewed friendship
that included agreements that had
solved the problem. The third
grader has his arm around the first
grader, and one of the mediators
said to me, “Isn’t that cute? We
helped them so they could be friends
again.” The experience of helping
restore a relationship had value and
meaning to all of the students
involved.

Cases that involve older children
can be fairly involved in complex.
Three sixth grade girls were referred
to peer mediation for “ongoing name
calling, note writing, harassment, ‘I
say, you said,’ etc.” It is important
for me to be available when this type
of conflict is being worked on and it
is difficult to find a block of time
when five students can get together
to work it through. The several
sessions to work through the
situation were well worth it. Here
are some of the things they all
agreed on to assure each other of
their future intentions: 1. Come to

John and Nasario joined the rest of
us proudly. They had solved their
problem and were ready to be
contributing members of our
community again. The mediators
returned proudly as well, having
helped restore a relationship.
the main source instead of telling other people.  2.  Don't believe rumors and don't spread rumors.  
3.  Go alone to the source.  4.  When we look at each other we will try to smile.  5.  When talking to someone, stay in the same language.  6.  First find out the truth.  7.  When you are talking, watch your body language and your verbal language.  

A complex case sometimes means there is a complex relationship and the problem solvers may end up in mediation again. However, the process is very valuable for all who are involved because they do some deep thinking that helps make things better. They have a basis to back to for working on further difficulties.

Peer mediation is one of the most rewarding parts of teaching in the public school system. My hope is that we can become a place where our first response to a conflict of any kind will be to work at restoring rather than punishing at my school. All of the fourth, fifth, and eighth graders know what the process is and how to use it. I am in the process of training all of the seventh graders. If I can arrange a training for the sixth graders, we will have exposed all of our upper graders to the skills and concepts. This is very exciting because it is almost like learning a new language. It is challenging because, like using a new language, it takes practice and it is often seen as easier things in the language we are more comfortable with.

The atmosphere that results is one that causes substitute teachers to leave notes like this, “Well, I enjoyed the day and was glad to be with them again. I hope you don’t mind hearing this again but I can’t help being amazed at how well they’re coming along. I just sit and look at them while they’re working and marvel at how the raw energy I saw in them as second graders is being transformed into the learning process. These kids are really going to become educated. Keep up the good work!” I believe that is the result of children who feel like they can be in control of themselves, and children who have decided that they want to be constructive.

The training of some of the seventh and eighth graders brought comments like this: “I learned how to listen.” “I learned how not to take sides.” “I really enjoyed it, it was fun.” “I learned how to solve a problem. I had a good time!” “My favorite part of the training was knowing that I’m going to help people with problems.” “I learned how to help myself in a conflict. I liked doing this a lot. It was really fun.” “I learned to tell the difference between thoughts and feelings.” These students have joined in a vision for working towards restoration rather than separation. I believe they are already contributing a great deal to creating peace in our world.
This book was an excellent, practical manual that helps (i) identify what leads certain students to fail to meet classroom expectations; and more importantly (ii) concrete action steps that create a culture where all students feel they are a successful part of a community of learners. I wish I read this book 5 years ago when I started teaching. Get the most popular abbreviation for Discipline That Restores updated in 2020. ‘Discipline that Restores’, All Acronyms, 16 October 2020, [accessed 16 October 2020]. Bluebook. All Acronyms, Discipline that Restores (Oct. 16, 2020, 1:10 PM), available at https://www.allacronyms.com/discipline_that_restores/abbreviated. CSE. All Acronyms.