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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a program at Castlewood Elementary School (New York) specifically directed at helping parents develop and enhance their skills in resolving the conflicts they confront in their own lives and relationships. Currently there is no structured program in Castlewood School to teach students conflict resolution skills. The underlying belief is that focusing on parents' skills is the best place to start, given that their utilization of these skills in the home would facilitate a more peaceable family environment, and provide a healthy model for their children regarding how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way. A Saturday morning and an evening weekday session were offered. Twelve participants signed up for the Saturday session and 15 for the evening session. Of the two fathers who expressed interest, neither attended. Only the Saturday group had a core group that attended all of the sessions. The 5-session, 10-hour training focused on understanding conflict, communication, cognitive flexibility, coping skills, and resolution. Results do not reveal a consistent pattern between or within individuals because of the situationally specific nature of the assessment tool utilized. However, more subjective indicators of progress were apparent within the participants. (MKA)

Training Parents as Peacekeepers - A Resolutionary Process

Leslie E. Popoff, Ph.D

Paper presented at the American Psychological Association's Annual Convention on August 16, 1998 as part of the symposium for the division of Peace Psychology - "Training Peacemakers, Peacekeepers, and Peace Educators: Programs and Principles."

I. Introduction.

We have recently witnessed a troubling rise in violent behavior among youth across the nation, dramatically highlighted by the series of fatal school shootings by students. These tragedies have been attributed to factors including family breakdown, violence on T.V. and in video games, the accessibility of firearms, and the combination of an emotionally fragile makeup and the inherent stress off adolescence.

While childhood violence may be viewed as an aberration, there are often other behavioral indicators of the difficulty that many children and adolescents face in regard to problem solving, decision making, and resolving conflicts in their lives.

The growing awareness of the need for education in the area of social and emotional growth has led to the development of various training programs implemented in schools today, a good number of which are aimed at teaching children how to resolve conflicts. Peer mediation programs are the most common, and research has demonstrated that such programs not only decrease conflicts among peers in the school setting, but also improve children's behavior in the home setting (Gentry and Benenson, 1993).

One frequently voiced concern among educators is that without parental support and follow through at home, the benefit of these types of programs cannot be maximized. When children do not get consistent messages from the significant adults in their lives, confusion, insecurity, and anxiety are often the result. Unfortunately, most parents did not have the benefit of conflict resolution training

in their formative years, and often did not have access to effective role models as they were growing up.

While schools work to teach students alternatives to confrontation and violence, witnessing violent and destructive arguments at home may serve to be a much more powerful contradictory message. Research has demonstrated that children become increasingly aggressive with peers when they frequently observe negative interaction between their parents or significant adults. Early antisocial behavior is often associated with inconsistent and harsh discipline. Some parent training programs have been implemented to instill positive parent-child interaction, or intervene when a destructive cycle is already in place. In addition, parents have frequently been enlisted by the schools as agents to facilitate positive changes in children, particularly regarding behavior (Briesmeister and Schaefer, 1998). Various parent training programs have been implemented which have emanated from the principles of learning theory and behavior modification. It is the child's behavior which is often the target for change, and it is the clinician who seeks to show the parents how to remedy the child's problem.

The particular parent group that I will discuss today differed from many others in that the target for change was in fact the parent. In addition. the workshop leader, myself, assumed the role of a facilitator/mediator rather than one of teacher/trainer. The goal of this training program was specifically directed at helping parents develop and enhance their skills in resolving the conflicts they confront in their own lives and relationships. Currently there is no structured program in this particular elementary school to teach the students conflict resolution skills. My underlying belief was that focusing on parents' skills was probably the best place to start, given that their utilization of these

skills in the home would facilitate a more peaceable family environment, and provide a healthy model for their children regarding how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way.

Castlewood school is located in Queens, New York. It houses approximately 400 students in grades K-5. The ethnic background of the student body is varied, and most dwell in a large garden apartment complex across from the school.

II. Procedure

A letter was sent home to the parents of each student in the school, requesting their participation in a five session, ten hour "Conflict Resolution" group. Two separate groups were offered, both a Saturday morning group and a weekday evening group, to enable working mothers and fathers to participate. Twelve parents signed up for the Saturday morning group, and fifteen parents for the weekday evening group. While this represented less than a 10% positive response, the two groups were felt to be a healthy size to build a sense of connection so that parents would feel safe enough to share personal concerns. Only two fathers had signed up, and neither of them showed up for any of the sessions, despite my encouragement of their participation. What was an even greater disappointment was that fact that only one of the groups (Sat. morning) had a core group that attended each of the five sessions. Their commitment to each other and to the group was rewarding, an seemed to make a positive difference for each of them.

Each of the participants completed the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) during the first and last group sessions. The W.C.Q. was developed to assess 8 dimensions of the coping process, which are either a problem focused or an emotion focused strategy. Lazarus

indicates that cognitive appraisal of the stressful event is performed first, which then leads to the selection of a particular coping strategy. Respondents are asked to rate on a four point Likert scale the extent to which they have used a particular strategy when dealing with a recent stressful situation. Two factors mediate the individual's choice. One is his or her appraisal of personal control in the given situation. If the individual perceives some control over the outcome, a problem focused strategy, such as playful problem solving will more likely be used. In contrast, the individual who feels helpless in regard to the outcome is more likely to use an emotion focused strategy such as distancing, in order to reduce feelings of distress.

The other mediating factor for choice of coping strategy is the individual's appraisal of the threat. Consequently, it is the interaction between the person and the situation that determines the coping strategy. It is how the individual appraises an event, and the individual's sense of personal control that may be modifiable, and it is these two areas that were identified as targets for intervention through this parent training.

III. The Training

Understanding Conflict

While conflict is a natural and inevitable part of living and relating to others, often it brings to mind negative associations and discomfort for many people. These negative perceptions emanate from early experiences with significant others in conflict situations, and can interfere with effective resolution of conflicts in adulthood.

Most of us as children learn to view conflicts as a "win-lose" and the opposing party akin to the "enemy". Our bodies reacted in a flight or fight knee-jerk response. We either learned to avoid conflict completely so that we wouldn't get hurt, or we learned to go on the attack and win at all costs. "If he hits you, hit him back," parents often tell kids. Meeting other people's expectations, gaining their approval and feelings of self worth are consequently often tied into the outcome of a conflict situation. The first session was devoted to helping participants get in touch with their perceptions of conflict, and the messages they received about it that have contributed to the way they handle conflict in the present.

Each participant was asked to think about a personal childhood experience with conflict in their family. This exercise quickly tapped into unhappy recollections of family feuding, harsh criticism, and feelings of rejection. Some parents expressed that the concern which drew them to this group was the fear that they might resort to the pattern of harsh discipline that their own parents had used with them. This open discussion and sharing helped to build a connection among the participants and helped to develop an atmosphere of acceptance and support that was so important to encourage their receptivity to learning new ways to resolve conflicts.

The next step was to build an awareness that there is a healthier way to solve problems, where both parties can gain a sense of positive resolution.

Communication

Conflict is not in itself negative; rather, it is our perception of conflict that makes it feel that way. When we perceive conflict as a threat to our egos, our reaction is to defend or attack. Conflict

can instead be perceived as an opportunity for change and growth, as well as an opportunity to improve a relationship. The vehicle of this is communication, and this was the next area of focus in the training. The participants practiced the art of effective communication with each other in the safety of the group, and then attempted to utilize the skills at home with the comfort of knowing they could discuss how it went with the group in the next session. Aspects of communication skills that were covered included awareness of the importance of time and place; eye contact, body language, and lack of distraction; I messages, clarifying questions, acknowledgment of feelings; and the importance of communicating a sincere desire to understand the other person's point of view.

Cognitive Flexibility

A primary emphasis of the training was to help parents recognize negative, self-defeating thought patterns; and begin to differentiate these from positive thoughts that facilitate conflict resolution and coping in general. The reciprocal relationship between stress and negative thought patterns was addressed, with self-defeating thoughts both creating stress as well as emanating from those experiences that are perceived as stressful.

Anger is often a defensive response to rejection, hurt, or anxiety. When you feel angry you no longer feel like a helpless victim. However, anger can be a destructive response when attempting to resolve an interpersonal conflict, because it causes you to become more fixed in your own position, leaving no room for empathy.

In regard to parent-child conflicts, parents need to become more aware of developmental stages so that they can assess how realistic their expectations are for a child at a particular age.

Associated with each stage are certain "anger triggers" for parents - an infant's nightly crying when put in his crib, the toddler who insists on pulling out all the clothes from the dresser; the seven year old who refuses to get ready for school, or the 14 year old who won't clean her room. Parents had a homework assignment to keep track of their own anger triggers during the week, and shared with each other how they responded and what they might do differently after reflection.

The "ABC's" of Rational-Emotive Therapy (Ellis & Grieger, 1977) were introduced, illustrated with examples of irrational statements that we make to ourselves which contribute to feelings of anger. A represents the event; B one's appraisal or beliefs and interpretations about A; and C, the consequences or feelings and behavior resulting from A and B. Irrational thoughts are couched in language which suggests tendencies toward all or nothing thinking, global generalizations, and personalization.

Coping Skills

Once participants became aware of their rational beliefs and negative thoughts, they needed to learn how to transform these into more rational and positive thoughts and beliefs through the process of disputation (Seligman, 1997). This is a cognitive exercise of gathering evidence which contradicts one's irrational thoughts.

Participants were taught techniques of stress reduction, including deep breathing and other methods of relaxation, as well as visualization.

Anger management was addressed by asking parents to identify those techniques they

currently use to deal with their anger, as well as others that might prove to be more effective for them (i.e. physical exercise, time for me, meditation, etc.).

Reaching Resolution

1. Adopt an attitude of collaboration. Shift from "you against me" to "us against the problem."

2. Agree to not withdraw or retaliate; no power plays.

3. Make a commitment to dialogue and gain a greater understanding of each other's thoughts and feelings.

4. Maintain respect for each other and any value differences.

5. Seek an alternative solution that creatively emanates from this process.

The above guidelines were discussed as integral to the process of arriving at a resolution of a conflict between two parties.

IV. FINDINGS

It was anticipated that after participating in this ten hour parent training program, parents would feel a greater sense of personal control in the resolution of interpersonal conflicts, and would engage in more problem solving techniques and less defensive strategies such as escape/avoidance. However, the Ways of Coping Questionnaire is not an effective pre-post measure particularly since the "recent stressful encounter" in question is variable. Examination of the completed pre and post

tests did not reveal a consistent pattern between or within individuals, because of the situationally specific nature of this assesement. tool. This training did not extend for a long enough period of time to utilize repeated measures design, which would have been most informative as to coping style. For the purpose of a time limited study such as this, a pre and post measure might be viable if the post measure inquired "how would you have handled the original stressful encounter now."

More often than not, as psychologists we do not have the benefit of clear, quantitative proof that our intervention efforts have a beneficial effect. Instead, we hope for more subjective indicators from the individuals we seek to help. I'd like to share what was most rewarding for me about my involvement in this parent group.

The core group of mothers that I spoke of earlier who were fully committed to participating in this training consisted of four mothers. Each was dealing with her own personal struggles. One carried the burden of supporting her family, as her husband was home on disability. Another was dealing with an emotionally abusive husband, a child in special education, and an impending divorce. There was a mom whose controlling husband dictated she stay home full time, giving her a weekly allowance that was more appropriate for her teenage daughter than for a mom with three kids. And finally, there was a woman who tried desperately to be the perfect wife and mother, but could never quite satisfy her overly critical husband.

These four moms found in each other and in the group a safe haven. Among each other and myself as facilitator, they could experience a sense of acceptance, validation, non-judgement, and support.

One of the parents was moved to write a letter to the group, which she shared at the last session. In it she states "... the group shows its concern for each individual, and opinion arise from free, open, unbiased thoughts ... Our meetings are a constant reminder to adjust ways of thinking and communicating. More than ever, this group makes me realize that communication is an ever evolving process, especially with our children who themselves evolve so quickly into adults."

For the last session, the mothers decided to make it a festive celebration, bringing in homemade goodies to share. It was a gift they gave to each other and myself, and they promised to try to continue their Saturday morning "renewal sessions." Towards the end of the school year, encounters with each of these mothers indicated that this experience still had meaning for them, and had a positive impact upon their lives.

V. Reflections on Running a Parent Group or "If you form it, will they come?"

1. Do they need it?

Like many communities across the country, many of the families in this community are confronted with financial struggles, problems with child care, loss of employment, illness, marital turmoil, divorce, caring for aging parents, and the like. Most parents do not seek support services outside the school because of time and money constraints, and the myriad of day to day responsibilities. Clearly, the need is there for parent support groups.

2. Do they want it?

On this point, I believe ambivalence prevails. A community school lacks anonymity, which can

be both a good and bad thing. Contact with your neighbors is almost unavoidable in multifamily dwellings such as a garden apartment complex. Understandably, there may be significant hesitation felt by parents to share personal concerns. At the same time, for many parents the desire to connect with others is very strong; as is the need to release some of their anxiety and frustration.

3. When is the right time?

To some extent, this depends upon who you are aiming to draw in. If you want both parents to have the opportunity to attend together, provide child care in the school. Parents who work may only be able to come evenings or weekends, while stay at home moms and dads may want to come during the day. You can't please everyone, but you can maximize your response rate by surveying parents' preferred times, and offering two or more sessions at various times. Remember to check that the P.T.A or other staff are not running meetings at the same time.

4. Where's dad?

Its almost the millennium, and it is still the moms for the most part who attend groups such as this. While men may be more willing to talk about their feelings now, they prefer a one-to-one situation behind closed doors. It still doesn't feel right to many men to show their vulnerability in front of others. The next step might be to form a group just for dads.

5. What's the payoff?

Change has its own rewards, but the process is usually associated with some degree of anxiety. Provide positive incentives along the way by creating a warm, pleasant physical environment

for these meetings. Refreshments do more then satisfy a sweet tooth. It's a welcome mat and a vehicle for sharing and socialization. Support groups can help to meet one's need for belonging and decrease the sense of isolation that many parents may experience.

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