

## Mediator Magic

What role do orange helmets play in a positive school environment? They're what students in a Las Vegas elementary school wear while helping peers solve minor disputes on the playground.



*Student mediators at William E. Ferron Elementary School (Las Vegas, Nevada) demonstrate how to work things out without fighting.*

At William E. Ferron Elementary School (Las Vegas, Nevada) we were spending precious instructional time every day dealing with discipline problems. We explored the possibility of having students solve minor disputes as they arise on the playground—problems such as cutting in line, arguing over the score of the game, and name-calling. The mediator idea had immediate promise because it cost little to implement. We hoped such a program would enhance our chances of creating a safe environment where students could achieve success, and we felt our students were capable of keeping everyone's self-esteem intact in the process. Here's how it works.

### Teaching Students to Become Mediators

Every two weeks, each teacher selects two students as mediators for his or her classroom. During their recess, these students report to the principal's office to learn how to be effective mediators. During that orientation, we address the points shown in Figure 1.

During orientation, the principal also reviews our two school rules—be kind and work hard—so that mediators can reinforce them when necessary. Mediators do not try to break up fights but always seek help from an adult on duty. The principal reminds the students that problems must be

solved with the head and the heart and not the hand. After orientation, the new mediators receive plastic orange hats to wear when on duty.

In addition to their playground duties, mediators fulfill an important role in the lunchroom. They stand at each end of their class table so that after checking to see that the floor and table areas are clean, they can dismiss peers. They also monitor their room's noise level and recommend classmates who deserve recognition cards from the lunchroom supervisors. (These cards are part of our "Build a Hero" behavior plan.)



*In the give-and-take of the playground, student mediators practice their own problem-solving skills and save their teachers valuable time.*

## "The principal reminds the students that problems must be solved with the head and the heart and not the hand."

### Getting Along Without Repelling Each Other

Since we instituted the program, we have discovered that academically proficient students do not always make good mediators. Sometimes students with commendable oral skills, and not the "straight A" students, offer their peers more appropriate assistance.

For example, last year several second-graders were discussing a problem that occurred at recess. The mediator, who had occasional academic difficulties, was heard to ask, "Can you all get along, or do we need to act like those magnets we used in science today; you know, when the north and the north are put together, they repel?" Another mediator then said, "Yeah, like a skunk." The group decid-

ed they could get along without repelling each other!

We have also found it useful to select as mediators students who have difficulty in making friends. The mental gymnastics they must use to help their peers solve problems have favorable effects on their own personal dealings with other children.

### On-the-Spot Training

Since we began the Mediator Program two years ago, the number of discipline problems (both major and minor) referred to the principal's office has declined considerably. Small problems do not have a chance to become larger ones. The minute students enter the room, instruction begins, creating a more academic environment in our school. The program has also contributed substantially to our schoolwide goal of increasing each student's sense of self-responsibility. Not only has the program assisted the students seeking help from peer mediators by giving their problems immediate assistance, but, just as we had hoped, mediators and school personnel have benefited as well. Students who serve as mediators learn valuable problem-solving skills: to think logically about processing the information presented to them, to see issues impartially, and to advise without censoring. They also gain recognition for their efforts. And school personnel benefit because they have fewer interruptions in their busy schedules.

#### 1. Setting the stage:

- What problems occur on the playground before school, during school, and at noon?
- Are most of these minor problems that can be solved quickly without involving the teacher or the principal?
- What causes small problems to become big problems?

#### 2. What mediators do:

- Serve as a peer model.
- Keep an eye out for any problems that might be brewing.
- Stop what they are doing to solve a problem.
- Ask one person to talk at a time.
- Ask the people to use soft voices.
- Listen to both sides.
- Use a polite tone of voice at all times.
- Ask each person what it is that he or she wants the other person to stop doing.
- Ask each person if he or she is able to stop doing those things.
- Suggest that they stop doing those things.
- Ask the students to apologize and shake hands.
- Ask the students if the problem has been solved, or if it should be referred to an adult.
- If the problem has not been solved, take it to an adult.

#### 3. What mediators do not do:

- Issue "citations," police, or patrol.
- Tattle.
- Scold or demand.
- Pass judgment.
- Force themselves on others.

Fig. 1  
Orientation for Mediators



Our students are learning that issues can be resolved more effectively by talking them out than by fighting. It has been thrilling to watch students who have had several opportunities to be mediators improve their problem-solving skills as they move from grade to grade. The peer modeling that takes place in our school is a constant source of on-the-spot training that cannot come from textbooks, worksheets, or lectures. The Mediator Program makes students active participants in enhancing a school environment that is friendly, safe, and happy. □

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