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PEER MEDIATION IN SCHOOLS

# STUDENTS RESOLVING CONFLICT



RICHARD COHEN  
SCHOOL MEDIATION ASSOCIATES

 GOOD YEAR BOOKS

*For the educators who implement peer mediation programs,  
the mediators who offer their help, and  
the students in conflict who make peace.*

*And for Rachel.*

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## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

*Students Resolving Conflict: Peer Mediation in Schools* will assist individuals at every level of experience and exposure to peer mediation. Its purpose is to serve as

- *A comprehensive introduction to conflict resolution and peer mediation*
- *A complete technical assistance manual for those involved in the process of implementing a peer mediation program*
- *A reference work for those who currently operate peer mediation programs*

After discussing the pressures that contribute to the problem of student conflict, the body of the book is divided into three parts.

**Part One: The Fundamentals of Conflict, Conflict Resolution, and Peer Mediation** makes up the theoretical portion of the book. Chapter 1 introduces basic conflict resolution theory and processes. Chapter 2 discusses conflict in the school setting and the limitations of the traditional approach to managing student conflicts. Together these chapters lay the foundation necessary for understanding peer mediation, which is presented in Chapter 3.

**Part Two: Implementing a Peer Mediation Program** consists of detailed chapters on all aspects of the design, implementation, and operation of a student mediation program. Chapter 4 discusses how to secure initial support. Chapter 5 covers every aspect of program design, from selecting a coordinator to determining program policies on confidentiality and voluntariness. Chapter 6 comprises a complete guide to training, with an additional section on program outreach for after the training is complete. Chapter 7 discusses everything you need to know about actually mediating cases. And finally, Chapter 8 concerns maintaining a healthy program.

**Part Three: Tools** includes a number of important sections. Chapter 9 presents complete transcripts of two peer mediation sessions, one from a high school and one from a middle school. In Chapter 10, a set of twelve conflict resolution lessons and materials will enable classroom teachers to begin working with their students. Sample peer mediation forms appears in Chapter 11, followed by a series of appendices including, among other things, a guide to the legal issues raised by peer mediation and suggestions for organizing conferences for peer mediators.

If you are new to peer mediation and have never observed a peer mediation session, I suggest that you read the mediation transcripts early on. This will give you an understanding of the mediation process that will enable you to get the most out of this book. If you are using this book to implement a peer mediation program in your school, read the entire book before you begin the process. Although the chapters in Part Two are laid out in rough chronological order, much of the work takes place simultaneously and you will benefit from having an overview at the start. The Implementation Readiness Survey at the back of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will be of special interest to you as well.

For readers who live and work outside of the United States, remember that the work described here was formulated in the U.S. educational system and cultural climate. Although educators around the world have adopted the peer mediation concept, the transferability of these ideas varies from country to country. Make sure you adapt the approach described in this book to the unique circumstances in which your students live and learn.

Please be advised that *Students Resolving Conflict* is not designed to teach you how to mediate or how to train students to mediate. No book alone can accomplish this task. The best way to learn to mediate is to participate in a qualified training program that includes extensive supervised practice. This book should be used to supplement such a mediation training program.

Peer mediation has been used primarily with students nine years old and older. The way peer mediation services are delivered in an elementary school differs markedly from a middle or high school, however. Although the theory and the general information presented here will be useful to educators at all levels, this book focuses on the implementation process typical in middle and high schools.

A couple of notes on the writing format are necessary. I have used the term *peer mediation* to refer to what is variously called peer mediation, conflict mediation, school mediation, and conflict managing. And, when describing mediation sessions, I often refer to only two parties even though mediation sessions can involve more. This is both because it is easier to read and because most peer mediation sessions do involve just two parties.

Finally, I encourage you to consider yourself a pioneer in this work. There are no “ten easy steps” to follow when implementing a peer mediation program. The variables are too complex: every school has different resources, needs, personalities, and educational philosophies. I have attempted to offer the collective wisdom of the people who have developed this field during its first decade. But in the end, you will have to make much of this up as you go. Be creative, take calculated risks, share what you learn with others, and most importantly, enjoy yourself.

Good Luck.  
*Richard Cohen*



# Contents

## Introduction

Students and Conflict	3
Conflict at School	5
Adolescent Psychology and Peer Pressure	7
The Increase in Student Conflict as a Symptom of a Larger Disease	8

## PART I THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CONFLICT, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND PEER MEDIATION

### Chapter 1 Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Understanding Conflict	12
Six Parameters of Interpersonal Conflict	13
History	14
Escalation/Intensity	15
Psychological Need	16
Triggers of Conflict	18
Perception	19
The Role of Non-Parties	20
Approaching Conflict Resolution	20
The Limits of Competition	21
Collaborative Conflict Resolution	23
Conflict Resolution Processes: Negotiation, Mediation, Arbitration	27
Mediation and Arbitration: A Comparison	29
The Differences Between Mediation and Arbitration	29
Mediation's Advantages	30
Agreement and Reconciliation	31

### Chapter 2 Conflict Resolution at School

The Traditional Approach to Managing Student Conflict	34
Shortcomings of the Traditional Approach	35
School Discipline vs. Conflict Resolution	37
Integrating Collaborative Conflict Resolution into Schools	38

## Chapter 3 Peer Mediation

<b>A Brief History of School-Based Peer Mediation</b>	42
<b>The Strengths of Students as Mediators</b>	44
<b>The Peer Mediation Program</b>	45
<b>The Peer Mediation Process</b>	46
<b>The Benefits of Peer Mediation</b>	47

## PART II IMPLEMENTING A PEER MEDIATION PROGRAM

### Chapter 4 Securing Initial Support

<b>School Change</b>	54
<b>Six Principles of School Change</b>	55
<b>Presenting Peer Mediation</b>	57
Addressing Ten Common Concerns About Peer Mediation	58
<b>Finding Your Audience</b>	62
Administrators	62
Administrators in Charge of Discipline	64
Teachers	65
Counselors and Social Workers	66
Parents	67
Students	68
<b>Tools for Needs Assessment and Support Building</b>	68
Questionnaires and Surveys	68
Meetings and Presentations	69
Workshops and Training	69
<b>Deciding Whether to Move Forward</b>	70
<b>Peer Mediation Implementation Readiness Survey, Part A</b>	71

### Chapter 5 Program Design and Planning

<b>The Program Coordinator</b>	74
The Coordinator's Responsibilities	75
The Qualities of an Effective Coordinator	76
How Much Time Does a Coordinator Need?	76
Who Will Coordinate?	77
Co-coordinators	78
Selecting the Coordinator	78
<b>Advisory Councils</b>	79
<b>Determining the Size and Scope of Your Program</b>	80

<b>Funding</b>	82
How Much Money Is Needed?	82
Where Is the Money?	83
Strategies for Raising Money	84
Community Partnerships	85
<b>Program Evaluation</b>	86
Why Evaluations Are Important	86
Measuring Your Program's Objectives	87
The Challenge of Evaluation	88
Evaluation Methods	89
Funding Evaluation Efforts	90
<b>Peer Mediation and School Discipline</b>	90
Which Issues Are "Mediatable"?	91
When Peer Mediation and School Discipline Overlap	92
<b>Do I Have to Go? Voluntariness and Peer Mediation</b>	95
<b>Confidentiality</b>	96
<b>When and Where to Mediate</b>	99
<b>Peer Mediation Implementation Readiness Survey, Part B</b>	102

## Chapter 6 Training and Outreach

<b>Approaching Training</b>	105
<b>Sources of Training</b>	107
<b>Evaluating Training Sources</b>	108
The Mediation Model	108
The Quality of the Training Program	109
<b>Criteria for Selecting Trainees</b>	112
Noah's Rules	114
Group Size	114
Including "At-Risk" Students in Your Training	115
Including School Staff in Your Training	116
<b>The Process of Selecting Trainees</b>	117
<b>Scheduling Training</b>	120
The Time of Year	120
The Time of Day	120
The Length and Configuration of Sessions	121
<b>Where to Train</b>	122
<b>During the Training</b>	122
<b>Outreach and Promotion</b>	123
<b>Peer Mediation Implementation Readiness Survey, Part C</b>	128



## Chapter 7 Mediating Cases

<b>Receiving Referrals for Mediation</b>	129
<b>Intake Interviews</b>	130
Goals of the Intake Interview	130
Setting Up the Interview	131
Conducting the Interview	131
Strategies for Convincing Students to Try Mediation	132
Determining Who Is a Party to a Conflict	133
Deciding Whether a Conflict Is Appropriate for Mediation	134
<b>Scheduling the Mediation Session</b>	135
<b>Assigning Mediators to a Case</b>	136
The Mediator Master Schedule	136
Basic Criteria for Assigning Mediators	137
Methods of Assigning Mediators	137
Using Adult Mediators	139
<b>Supervising Mediation Sessions</b>	140
At the Start of the Session	140
During the Session	141
At the Conclusion of the Session	142
<b>Case Follow-Up</b>	143
<b>Record Keeping</b>	144

## Chapter 8 Mediator Meetings and Program Maintenance

<b>Case Analysis and Discussion</b>	146
<b>Advanced Training</b>	147
<b>Building Group Cohesion and Morale</b>	148
<b>Special Projects</b>	148
<b>Internal Program Discipline</b>	149
<b>Mediator Meetings: When and Where?</b>	149
<b>Facilitating Mediator Meetings</b>	150

### PART III TOOLS

## Chapter 9 Peer Mediation Session Transcripts

<b>Transcript 1: The Basketball Throw</b>	155
<b>Transcript 2: The Hollywood Club</b>	165

## Chapter 10 Twelve Conflict Resolution Lessons

<b>Introduction</b>	171
<b>Creating a Format for the Lessons</b>	171
<b>Lesson 1</b> Creating a Group Contract	173
<b>Lesson 2</b> Conflict Is Normal	175
<b>Lesson 3</b> Conflict Can Be Positive	178
<b>Lesson 4</b> Everyone Can Win	180
<b>Lesson 5</b> Positions, Interests, and Underlying Needs	182
<b>Lesson 6</b> Styles of Conflict Resolution	188
<b>Lesson 7</b> The Pros and Cons of Fighting	194
<b>Lesson 8</b> Conflict Escalation	196
<b>Lesson 9</b> I Messages: Speaking to Promote Collaboration	199
<b>Lesson 10</b> Active Listening I: Listening to Promote Collaboration	204
<b>Lesson 11</b> Active Listening II: Listening for Feelings	206
<b>Lesson 12</b> The Six Basic Steps of Conflict Resolution	209

## Chapter 11 Program Forms

<b>Implementation Timeline</b>	218
<b>Needs Assessment Questionnaire for Teachers</b>	220
<b>Peer Mediation Program Coordinator Job Description</b>	222
<b>Student Nomination Form</b>	223
<b>Peer Mediator Interview Guidelines</b>	224
<b>Parent Permission Letter</b>	225
<b>Teacher Permission to Mediate Form</b>	226
<b>Peer Mediator Contract with Program</b>	227
<b>Peer Mediator Oath</b>	228
<b>Peer Mediation Referral Form</b>	229
<b>Case Summary Form</b>	230
<b>Peer Mediation Agreement Form</b>	232
<b>Post-mediation Session Questionnaire</b>	233
<b>Mediator Post-session Self-Evaluation</b>	235
<b>Sample Codes of Discipline</b>	236

## Appendices

<b>Appendix A:</b> Legal Considerations of Peer Mediation Programs	238
<b>Appendix B:</b> Suggestions for Grant Writing	244
<b>Appendix C:</b> Private Sessions	245
<b>Appendix D:</b> Implementing Peer Mediation Programs in Many Schools Simultaneously	247
<b>Appendix E:</b> Organizing Conferences for Student Mediators	249

<b>Bibliography</b>	253
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<b>Index</b>	257
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# **Part I: The Fundamentals of Conflict, Conflict Resolution, and Peer Mediation**

## CHAPTER 1

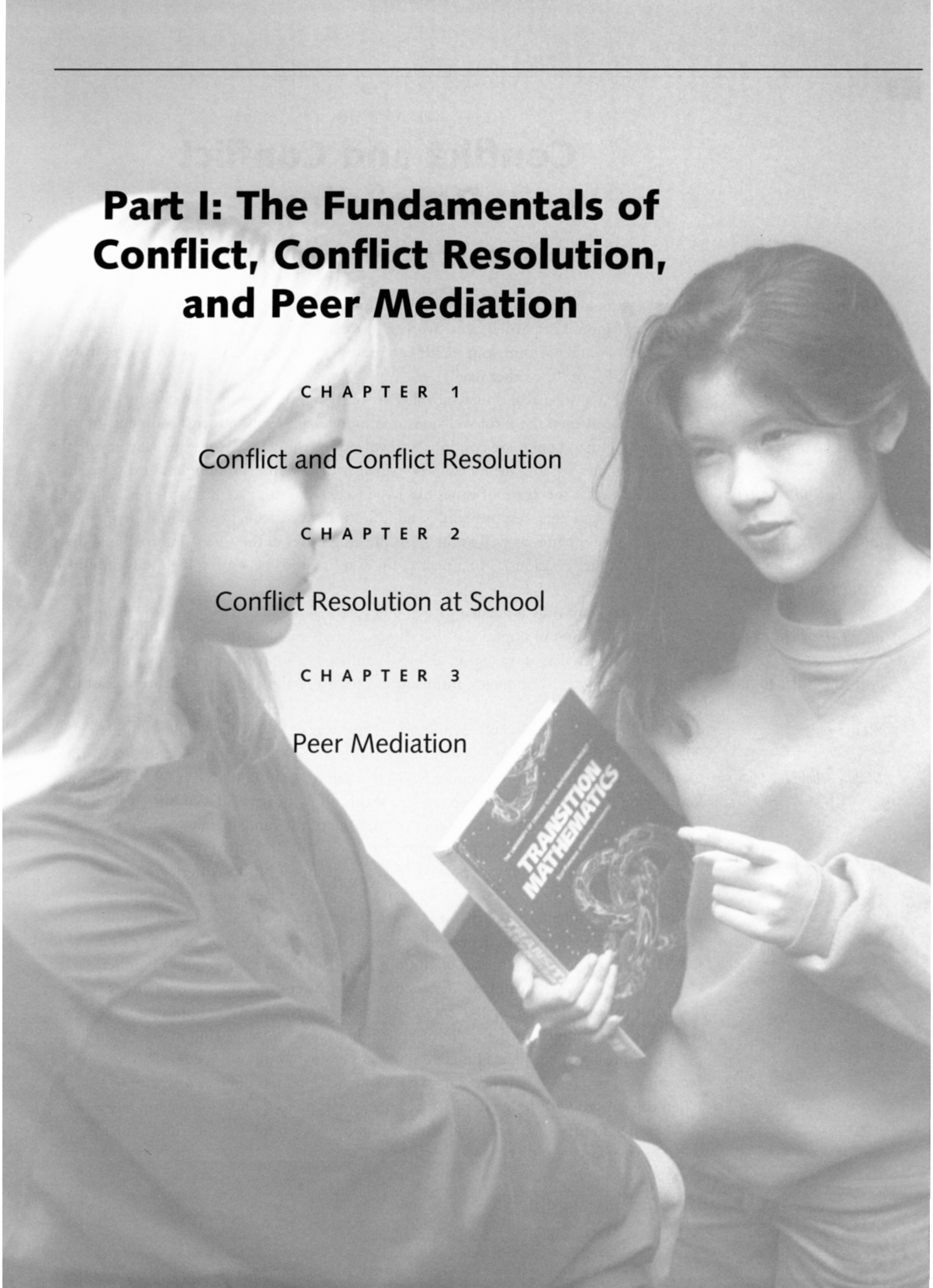
Conflict and Conflict Resolution

## CHAPTER 2

Conflict Resolution at School

## CHAPTER 3

Peer Mediation



# Conflict and Conflict Resolution

## UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

*The thing I like about mediation is that the students would be angry at first, but when they talk it over, they seemed to be happier about their choices and can learn to face them.*

*Middle school mediator*

**W**hen were you last involved in a conflict with anyone in your life: a friend, a spouse or partner, a co-worker, a student, a teacher, a neighbor; perhaps a conflict within yourself? If you are like most people, your answer is probably “this morning” or “the other day.”

Conflict is a normal and unavoidable part of living, the legitimate outcome of interactions between even the most well-meaning individuals. From our first moments of life to our last, human beings are continually involved in conflicts. We are the baby crying for food, the toddler arguing over a ball, the teenager demanding a midnight curfew. Later, we conflict over a spectrum of issues too large to detail: jobs, parenting, money, religion, values, politics, careers, responsibilities, ad infinitum. We conflict over mundane inanities (closing the toothpaste) as well as the most pressing issues of the times (international disputes, AIDS, race relations). No aspect of life is resistant to becoming the focus of human conflict.

Conflict is not only a normal part of living, it is also a necessary part. It is through the friction of forces in opposition that things change. Fields as diverse as political science, biology, physics, and religion all view conflict as a source of potentially positive change and growth. Democracy, intimacy, electricity, fertility, gravity—all are at least in part born of conflict.

Conflict plays an especially significant role in human psychological development. The conflicts that we face in our lives shape our characters, our cultures, and our world. Conflicts can make us stronger and wiser. They can teach us better ways of solving problems, bring us closer to the people we care about, show us new sides of ourselves, and enlighten us regarding our place in the world. One of the fundamental goals of all conflict resolution work is to help people harness this positive potential of conflict.

But conflicts are not always positive. Ask any group of North Americans to free-associate with the word “conflict,” and their ideas are decidedly negative: fighting, sadness, death, violence, pain, divorce, anger, gangs. On an emotional level, people can feel unloved, angry, and depressed as a result of conflicts. People go to war or are forced to live under the inhuman conditions attendant to war as a result of conflict. Certainly, then, conflict can have destructive as well as constructive consequences.

Most broadly defined, *conflict* is a struggle between two or more opposing forces. As such, it is not confined to the realm of human behavior. Animals, land masses, even ideas can be said to be in conflict. Human conflicts operate on one of three levels. They can be *intrapersonal*, as when one is deciding whether to accept a job offer or not; *interpersonal*, as when one argues with his or her partner regarding how to spend money; and *intergroup*, as when neighborhoods, races, and nations dispute. This book is concerned primarily with interpersonal conflict.

No two interpersonal conflicts are identical. Every interpersonal conflict throughout history has been characterized by the unique attributes of the place, the people, and the issues involved. But interpersonal conflicts, in fact all human conflicts, are defined by similar characteristics. Once you can recognize and understand these parameters, you become a more effective facilitator of conflict resolution. The following section will describe these parameters.

First, though, it is necessary to define a number of terms that will appear in this discussion. The word *conflict* will be used to describe an interpersonal dispute in its totality. The entire series of events that is associated with a dispute—from the first time there is tension between people to the time when those tensions are resolved—will be referred to as the *conflict*. The word *party* refers to any person or group of people directly involved in a conflict. And *issues* are those subjects over which the parties disagree. Anything that one party wants to change about their relationship with the other party is an issue.

## SIX PARAMETERS OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

To illustrate the parameters of interpersonal conflict, let's look at a typical student dispute, one that might very well end up in peer mediation.

*Roxanne and Amy are fifteen years old. Although they grew up in the same neighborhood and have known each other for most of their lives, they have never been friends. Roxanne and Amy currently attend Central High School together where they happen to be in the same English class.*

*About two months ago, Amy's boyfriend Sidney suddenly broke up with her. She was very hurt by this because she cared deeply for Sidney, and she still has difficulty accepting that Sidney is not "hers." Two weeks after their breakup, Amy discovered that Sidney was dating Roxanne. She immediately assumed that Roxanne had had an influence upon Sidney's decision to break up with her. When Amy discussed this with her friends, they supported her theory. The "discovery" has increased Amy's pain about Sidney, and she has quickly grown to despise Roxanne.*

*For her part, Roxanne had no interest in Sidney until he approached her at a party six weeks ago. She had no plan to steal Sidney away from Amy; in fact, she never gave either of them a thought until Sidney asked her out. Sidney has since told her some nasty things about Amy, however, and as a result Roxanne tries to have nothing to do with her.*

*Amy once spoke with her older brother Joe, who knows Sidney, about this situation. Joe told her that Sidney had been planning on breaking up with her for some time. He said that it had nothing to do with Roxanne. Amy believed this for a little while, but not for long.*

*Although they hardly ever see each other, a tangible level of tension has grown between the two girls. Their relationship has also taken on a life of its own through the rumor mill at school. Each girl hears from her friends that the other wants to fight her. Amy sometimes thinks that she sees Roxanne giving her dirty looks. Roxanne knows that Amy has been spreading a rumor around school that she is an alcoholic. They have never confronted each other with these allegations.*



The only time Roxanne and Amy are certain to see each other during the school day is in the English class that they share. Even there, however, they have managed to keep each other at arm's length. One time the teacher assigned them to work together, and when Amy refused, Roxanne was able to convince him to give them different partners.

Today in English class, Amy made a presentation in front of the room. When she looked out, she saw Roxanne laughing, presumably at her. Amy found this extremely distracting, and as a result she did a poor job on the presentation. She felt embarrassed and angry. At the end of class, she went up to Roxanne and confronted her:

**Amy:** Is something wrong?

**Roxanne:** No, is something wrong with you?

**Amy:** What's wrong is that you are a bitch.

**Roxanne:** What did you say?

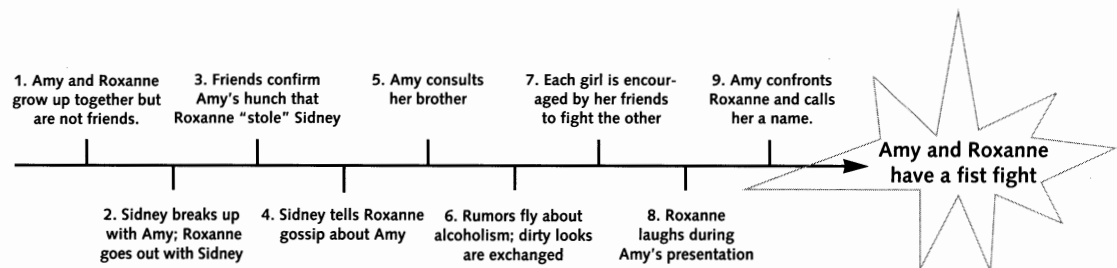
In an instant Roxanne jumped up and the two girls threatened and pushed each other until they were separated by the teacher.

Now let's return to our parameters.

## History

A climactic moment in a conflict is best understood as the outgrowth of the series of events that precede it. Interpersonal conflicts always have *histories*: past behaviors, experiences, conversations, and perceptions that, taken together, define them. Like the plot of a novel, conflicts have a beginning, a middle, and inevitably, an end. Their "storyline" can span years or only days or hours, but conflicts rarely happen in an instant.

The confrontation between Roxanne and Amy is best understood by referring to their history. A diagram of this history looks like this:



Typically, interpersonal conflicts come to the attention of outsiders only after they have been going on for some time. The English teacher here, for example, watched as a brief and relatively meaningless conversation between two of his students culminated in a fight. One must review the history to understand why the two girls ended up in a physical confrontation.

Past events not directly related to the relationship of the parties should be considered

part of the history of a conflict as well. Perhaps Amy failed a test this morning and was in a particularly bad mood. Perhaps Roxanne's father taught her never to back down from a fight. The private and the shared histories of the parties often propel their conflict forward.

## Escalation/Intensity

Interpersonal conflicts are rarely isolated events. They are usually composed of a series of actions taken by the parties involved. Like a conversation or a tennis match, one party takes action, the other responds with an action of his or her own, the first party receives that second action and responds accordingly, and so on. Every action by one party helps determine the reaction of the other.

As a result, the level of tension or intensity in a conflict is not static. Tensions between parties *escalate* or *de-escalate* during the course of a conflict, sometimes during the course of a single interaction. When a conflict is escalating, each action taken, each word uttered, serves to increase the parties' distress. Conversely, when conflicts *de-escalate*, distress between and within the parties decreases. The chart below illustrates some of the contrasting characteristics of escalating vs. de-escalating conflicts.

### When Conflicts Are Escalating:

- *Direct communication is difficult and ineffective*
- *Parties talk more about the other's deficiencies*
- *Painful emotions become more intense*
- *Trust is reduced*
- *Extraneous people become involved*

### When Conflicts Are De-escalating:

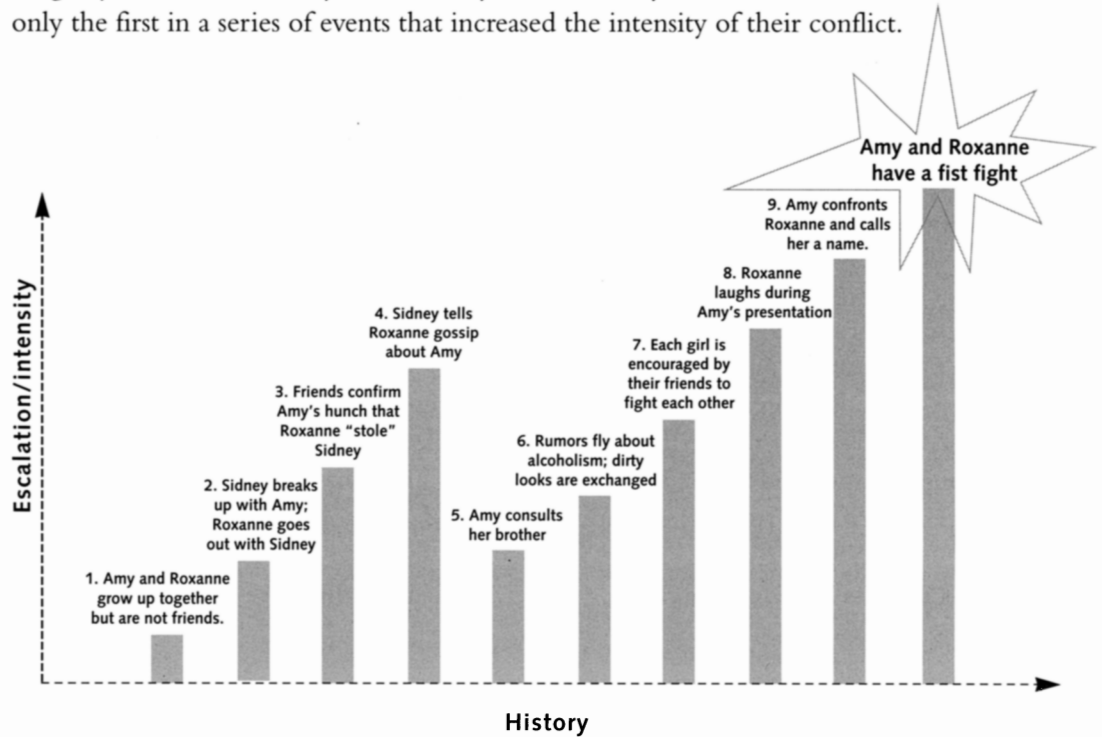
- *Direct communication is fluid and effective*
- *Parties talk more about their own needs*
- *Positive emotions become more intense*
- *Trust is gradually regained*
- *Only people who are part of the conflict (and possibly a mediator) are involved*

One key aspect of escalation is that parties' actions often mirror each other. If one party concedes on one issue (and de-escalates the conflict), the other will be more inclined to concede on another. But if one party acts in such a way as to escalate the conflict, it increases the likelihood that the other will do the same. If Roxanne spreads rumors about Amy, Amy will probably spread rumors about Roxanne. To achieve victory, Amy might even escalate the conflict by having her friends spread rumors about Roxanne as well. This spiral of cause and effect puts parties on a path of escalation that is difficult to alter and that can result in grave consequences.

*Peer mediation gives our peers a confidential way of letting out their true feelings. Anger is used to cover up many other emotions. It's a way to speak and be heard. And it's a chance to stop the violence before it escalates.*

*High school mediator*

Amy and Roxanne's conflict, like many student conflicts, was on just such an escalating trajectory. The issue that initiated the conflict was Amy's distress because Roxanne allegedly "stole" her ex-boyfriend Sidney. But these boyfriend difficulties were only the first in a series of events that increased the intensity of their conflict.



Conflicts often escalate to a point where the original issues in dispute are forgotten, obscured, or minimized in comparison to the parties' concerns over subsequent actions. Amy might in the end be more angry that Roxanne ruined her presentation than because she dated Sidney. Roxanne might similarly be more angry that Amy threatened her in front of the class than because Amy had spread rumors about her. The escalation process adds discrete, extraneous issues to a conflict that can overshadow what were once the primary issues in dispute.<sup>5</sup>

## Psychological Need

The third characteristic of interpersonal conflict concerns the separate, inner life of each party. Specifically, it refers to the degree to which a conflict becomes entangled with parties' attempts to meet their personal, psychological needs. This complex, *internal* dimension influences the dynamics of an interpersonal conflict as much as events that occur externally between the parties. To understand this, we must review some simple psychology.

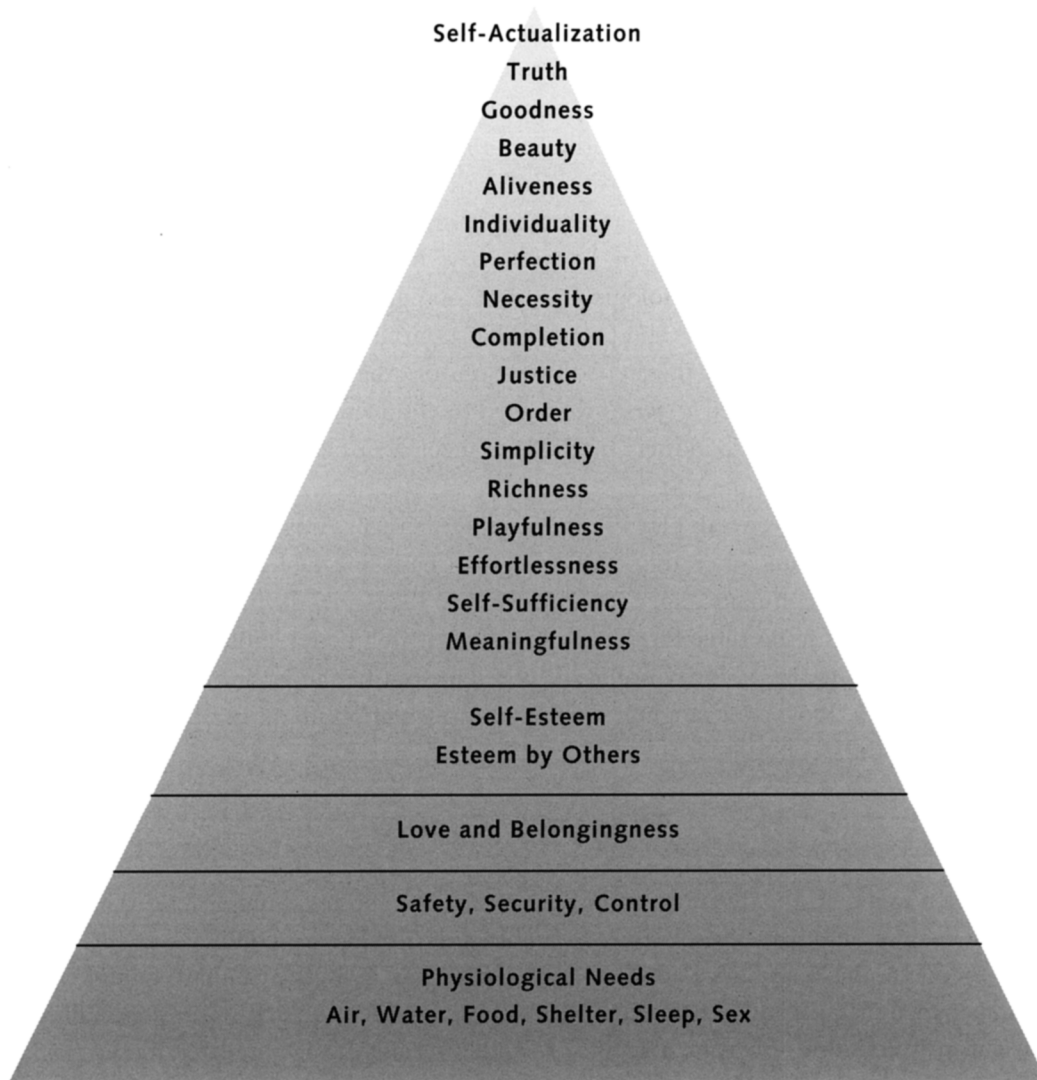
All of us—regardless of age, sex, religion, or cultural background—share basic psychological needs that we strive to fulfill. These include the need to feel safe and secure, to be loved, to be in control of one's life, to belong, and to achieve. Meeting these needs is as essential to psychological health as air, water, and food are to physical health.

<sup>5</sup> This dynamic can be clearly discerned in large-group conflicts which, because of their complexity, have a tremendous potential for escalation. In many wars, the legacy of killings and atrocities motivates the parties as much as the original issues in dispute.



Noted psychologist Abraham Maslow called human beings the “wanting” animal because we are constantly striving to satisfy our needs. Whenever one need is satisfied, another one always takes its place. Striving to meet evermore sophisticated needs, Maslow asserted, is the essence of human development. He formulated the hierarchy of needs diagrammed here.

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



From *Motivation and Personality* by Abraham H. Maslow (Harper & Row, 1954)