

# Mediation or conflict management in school

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## Abstract

Conflicts between students are a part of daily school life. If they are not supervised in a constructive way, conflicts can prevent the school from reaching its objectives and will affect negatively the school climate.

Mediation is one of the approaches, which aims to reduce conflict between individuals and groups at home, school or workplace. Acquiring resolution skills may provide students with the necessary tools to solve their own conflict in a responsible and productive way. This kind of training can also enhance students' self-esteem and will improve their communication skills.

This article reviews the history of mediation in western countries and describes essential elements of adult and peer mediation programs. At the end, the advantages and limits of mediation training and its possible applications for Iranian schools are discussed.

**Key Words:** Mediation, conflict management, school life, communication skills, resolution skills, self-esteem, peer mediation programs

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## Introduction

Students' behavioral problems and abnormalities in school are not new phenomena. Students' undesirable activities include a vast range of unacceptable behaviors such as lack of participation in class programs, causing disturbance for other students, violence, including verbal violence, physical violence, and also destroying the school building, equipment and facilities.

Methods used in Iranian schools for conflict reduction stand at the position where they see the undesirable behavior as a result of student's personal problems and those of the family and the student's cultural environment. These methods therefore, apply force and use the reward/punishment system to eliminate such behaviors. Warning, reproach, calling the parents to school, physical punishment, and in some cases expulsion from school are among common methods used in schools against the students' violating or violent behaviors. These methods which are often carried out without considering the children's needs, expectations, and life conditions, do not have that much influence on solving the students' behavioral conflicts and problems. In fact, by generating negative feelings in the students, these methods result in some other undesirable behaviors in the future.

By investigating methods for confronting with the students' behavioral conflicts in other countries, it becomes obvious that in the recent decades new viewpoints have been offered in the field of analyzing students' behavioral problems. Accordingly, different policies are used for preventing and reducing conflicts. A new method for responding to behavioral problems often emphasizes a viewpoint that is systematic, and is the result of combination and interaction of various factors in creating a person's behavior. In these methods, instead of searching for problems *in* the student, the problems are investigated in a broader framework so as the factors related to the student, his/her family, cultural background, and especially the school and its internal variables are assumed influential factors in triggering the problems. In order to prevent and reduce undesirable behaviors, these methods entangle with

each of the factors important in creating problems, especially in changing the school social-mental conditions.

Mediation, circle time, participatory conflict resolution, whole school policy, and assertive training are examples of the successful methods that are used in the recent years in schools of some other countries for responding to students' behavioral problems. These methods strengthen the fundamental communication skills especially the ability to listen, to sympathize, and to co-work strengthen self-acceptance and self-esteem in the students and equipping them with a set of beneficial and positive strategies to be used in difficult conditions, such as personal conflicts, or in bullying situation. (Kingston Friends Workshop Group, 1989)

In this article, mediation is described as one of the effective techniques for conflict and problem resolution between individuals and groups and is explained as an educational attitude and educational equipment for supporting children and youth in school.

Mediation is a simple, positive, and clear process in which trained and neutral individuals help the two sides of the conflict come to a solution that is acceptable for both sides. Mediators are equipped with special skills. Mediation can be used in different humanitarian environments, meaning in places where individuals live or work with each other, whether it is based on necessity or interest.

One type of mediation is mediation in the family and in times when the family members are caught up with conflicts and arguments. (Caillet, 1995). In these cases, skilled and trained individuals can be suitable help for these conflicts. (Guillet & Leblanc, 1995; Van Den Steen, 1995;) Of other types of mediation, is mediation in the neighborhood or among neighbors. In the judgmental circumstances as well, mediation can be carried out between the two parties of the quarrel aside from the regular judgment procedure. This type of mediation has been also very much welcomed (Bonfe-Schmitt, 1998; Delgado, 1998). Another type of mediation is the one used in organizations in order to resolve organizational conflicts (Drowly, 1998). Yet another types of mediation are used in international conflicts. Mediation is

important to be used in all situations at individual, group, and international levels. Holy Quran also considers mediation as a religious responsibility: “Heed God and patch up any differences that may stand between you.” (Al-Anfal: 1) – “Keep yourselves to improve matters among mankind.” (Al-Baghareh: 224)

## Mediation in School

The philosophy of mediation in school is that the existence of conflict is a normal issue and an unavoidable part of the school daily life. Mediation in school is done in different ways in different countries. In general, two methods are more in used: a) Adults mediation, and b) Peers mediation.

a) Adults mediation – In this method, the mediation services are carried out through specialized individuals that are called “mediators”. These persons who are often invited from outside school (universities, research centers, and social service organizations) to schools for the purpose of preventing behavioral and educational problems of students as well as assisting teachers in these matters.

b) Peers mediation. In this method, essential elements of non-violent management of students' conflicts are discussed. This method, which has become popular in many countries such as the United States, Australia, Newzeland, and The United Kingdom, often takes place in continuation of the adults mediation programs in school. In this method, students gain the skills necessary to solve conflicts and problems and take care of the peers' issues.

Mediation training consists of the following levels:

a) Making the volunteer teachers and students aware of behavioral problems in school and their consequences;

b) Training volunteer teachers and students in essential skills and activities for mediation between peers. The volunteers are also trained on methods of confronting issues such as aggression, harming others, damaging the school equipments. Students are

trained in fields of strengthening self-esteem, communication skills, creative thinking, and group collaboration.

c) Implementing the project. In this stage, the mediating volunteer students who have already received necessary training, will be given special clothing, sign, or hat so that they can be recognized and distinguished from other students.

d) Setting up an operation group. The operation group in school is setup upon starting the mediation program. Members of this group are the mediating volunteer students and one or two teachers for supervising effectiveness of program.

e) Evaluation. In order to assess the program, it is necessary to evaluate peers' mediation or any other program that is run in school, at the end of each term or academic year. Researches show that mediation programs have positive influences (Cooper 1995). One of the countries with successful experiences in the field of mediation is North Ireland (Farrel et. al., 1998). Of other successful experiences, we can refer to the field research in the University of Peace in Belgium in the field of peers' mediation (Cuvelier et. al., 1996). Some researches as well show the limits of such methods (John Pier Haza, 1995). Just as neither of the educational methods applied in the world are without error, mediation also has certain limits despite all its benefits. This program should not be considered as the only problem solving solution or the immediate resolver for all kinds of behavioral problems at school.

Using the mediation approach, can be very beneficial especially for those schools situated in suburban areas of cities with behavioral disciplinary problems. The children and adolescents in these areas are grown with a culture of defeat and respond to the contrasts and different crises in their lives by violence. These students are often indifferent toward or resistant against traditional disciplinary methods in schools. Some of the centers in the country can encourage the carrying-out of this type of programs and teach the schools healthy and constructive methods of responding to behavioral problems and offer mediatory services. The educational sciences and psychology faculties can be considered among the most important centers for offering this kind of training to schools.

In either case, mediation is a process, which can help moving to a healthier society, *if* it takes place with the participation, guidance, and supervision of parents and instructors, and by complete training of persons involved.

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