

Teaching Techniques

Peer Modeling in a Violence Prevention Newsletter

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Topic

Integrating positive peer influence and violence prevention.

Lesson Objective

1. Students will interview classmates who have solved conflicts peacefully, and will write newsletter articles that summarize the interviews.
2. Students will realize that many of their classmates do not rely on violence or aggression to solve conflicts.
3. Students will learn how their classmates have been able to diffuse aggressive situations.
4. Students will feel good about themselves because they are actively participating in an activity that is making their school a safer place.

Activities and Strategies

Students for Peace Newsletters were developed as part of a comprehensive violence prevention program involving more than 8,000 inner-city middle school students.¹ Newsletters featured stories about students who responded nonaggressively to familiar conflict situations. The newsletters direct a prosocial message to students using positive peer role models to encourage adoption or maintenance of nonaggressive behavior. Unlike social advertising, these newsletters report what audience members are actually doing to avoid violence and other high-risk behaviors.²

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Aggressive students often receive attention for their negative behavior, which encourages other students to think this type of behavior is socially acceptable. A violence prevention newsletter provides a fun and innovative way to recognize nonaggressive students who seldom receive positive reinforcement for their behavior. When producing the newsletter, students are encouraged to be investigative reporters, like the ones they see on television. However, instead of highlighting negative behavior, the newsletter stories feature students who have been able to resolve problems peacefully. From focus group discussions, Students for Peace staff found that students wanted to receive attention for their good behaviors and appreciated the fact that their statements and opinions were valued when interviewed and published in print.³ Students commented that they were "sick and tired" of hearing teachers and students talk only about the negative events that happened around school.

The newsletter class exercise benefits student interviewers, interviewees, and readers. Throughout the interview process, students realize that aggressive behaviors are not wanted, and in fact, are frowned upon. Placing this type of negative stigma on aggression serves as additional support for the notion that peaceful attitudes and behaviors are what truly warrant attention and praise.

Since newsletters describe specific behaviors and cognitive skills that other students can emulate, students who read these stories identify with the role models and realize that, "He was a tough kid, and he didn't fight. I guess I don't have to fight."³ For example, newsletter articles may describe what students were saying to themselves at the time of an incident ("He's not worth it. Stay calm and don't let him get to you! Don't let him get you into a fight over nothing"). Newsletter stories also illustrate positive outcomes. Some students fear that if they do not fight or if they try to solve a conflict in a peaceful manner they will be teased or called a coward. Newsletters feature real life experiences where role models did not suffer negative consequences as a result of their nonaggressive behavior.

Interview Topics

Possible topics for newsletter stories include a) students who have walked away from a fight and the skills they used to avoid getting into a fight, b) students' feelings about and peaceful reactions to rumors and name-calling, including racial and gender name-calling,

c) reasons why some students have decided not to carry weapons, d) students who have gone to a teacher, law enforcement officer, or a parent for advice or assistance, and e) students who either have decided that they do not want to belong to a gang or who have decided to stop being in a gang.

How Students Should Conduct an Interview

1. Decide on the newsletter's topic and ask around the school for students who might have a story that relates to the chosen topic.

2. Bring a note pad to write down student's quotes and information.

3. Ask students these questions.

Have you ever been in a situation where (the topic)?

What happened? (Describe the situation.)

When did this happen? Who was involved?

How did this make you feel?

What exactly did you do? (Describe nonaggressive behavior.)

What were you thinking? (Describe the thought process.)

What happened afterwards? (Describe positive outcome.)

Example of Interview with a Student who Avoided a Fight

Interviewer: Hi! My name is (interviewer's name) and I would like to interview you for our newsletter. I want to ask you about a time when you walked away instead of getting into a fight (topic).

Student: Okay, what do you want to know?

Interviewer: Why were you about to get into a fight?

Student: This guy was talkin' lies about my mom.

Interviewer: Please explain what happened.

Student: I was walking down the hall last week....

Interviewer: Can you please be more specific?

Student: All week he had been getting on my nerves. One day in gym, he said that my mom was fat and ugly....

Interviewer: What did you do to avoid the fight?

Student: I kept telling myself that this guy wasn't worth it. I knew that he wasn't telling the truth. I kept my cool, and didn't let him get to me... (*behavior and thought process to be emulated*)

Interviewer: Why did you decide not to get into a fight?

Student: Well, I knew he was just saying lies. Anyway, I didn't want to get into trouble with the school or with my parents. My mom and dad have always told me... (*thought process to be emulated*)

Interviewer: How did things turn out?

Student: He got tired of trying to get me mad, so he quit buggin' me... (*positive outcome*)

Interviewer: Thanks for your story.

Putting it all into one Document

A desktop publishing software, like Microsoft Publisher,[®] or any word processing programs could be used to write the newsletter.

Step 1: Design draft. Before typing the newsletter, design a draft of the final product. Organize a layout plan that specifies where the articles and the pictures will be placed on the page (Figure 1).

Step 2: Articles. Things to remember when drafting newsletter articles: a) consult with school district administrators about requirements to be met before printing students' quotes or pictures (parental consent forms), b) use bold or underlined print to emphasize the story's nonviolent message, c) use columns of print, since columns are easier for the eye to scan, d) avoid difficult words that students might not recognize or understand; use students' exact words and phrases, e) catch students' attention with an exciting headline, photograph, or drawing, and f) copy the newsletters onto bright colored paper, as students like this drastic difference from plain white paper.

Step 3: Pictures and artwork. Things to remember when taking pictures for the newsletter: a) pictures are more influential if the person is "acting out" the desired positive behavior that relates to the newsletter story topic; be sure not to picture aggressive behaviors in photos, b) people need to be relatively close, far away photos are hard to see, and c) natural (outdoor) light usually is best. Things to remember when using artwork in the newsletter: a) outline artwork with black ink pen, b) explain, if necessary, with legible text, and c) give students credit (name, grade, school).

If you decide to scan in pictures or artwork, you need to make sure that your printer has enough memory (at least one megabyte). Pictures scanned at higher pixel rates look clearer and copy better, but require more memory. Scanning also can be unsuccessful if the original photo is too dark. If you paste photos or artwork into the document, make sure that the final copy is not too dark.

Distribution

Distribution is the most important part of the newsletter process. Having worked hard to produce the newsletter, make sure students are receiving, reading, and understanding the newsletter. It is best for students to receive the newsletter during a class where they will have 10-15 minutes to read, discuss, and role play newsletter stories. Description of the best distribution process: a) teacher asks for a student volunteer to distribute newsletters, b) student reads the newsletter out loud, c) teacher asks student(s) to summarize the newsletter story and state its nonviolent message, d) student asks class if they agree with the story's nonviolent message (show of hands or shout out if they agree), and e) student asks class if anyone has a personal story that they would like to share where they were able to diffuse an aggressive situation.

Grade Level and Subject Area

Grades 6-8/English, journalism, and enrichment classes

Resources and Materials

Resources and materials

Pencil and paper for interview, typewriter or word processor, colored paper, copier,

camera and film, and most importantly, energetic students and teacher.

Optional: Microsoft Publisher® software and scanner to copy photos on to disk.

References

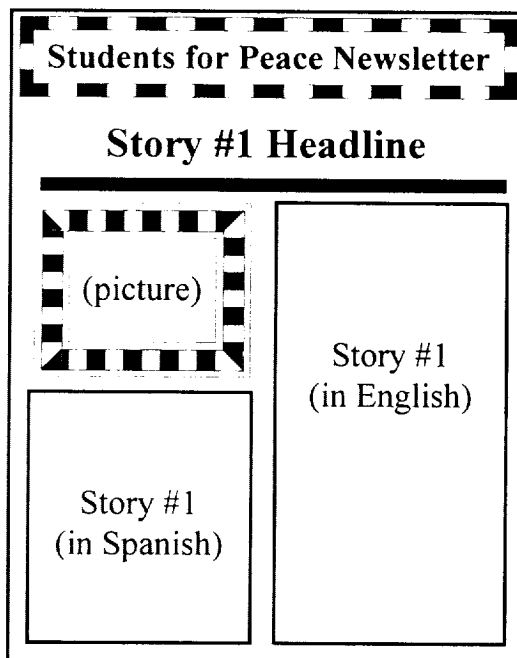
1. Kelder SH, Orpinas PK, McAlister A, et al. The Students for Peace Project: A comprehensive violence prevention program for middle school students. *Am J Prev Med*. To be published.

2. McAlister AL. Behavioral journalism: Beyond the marketing model for health communication. *Am J Health Promo*. 1995;9(6):417-420.

3. McReynolds LS. A qualitative evaluation of a violence prevention newsletter among aggressive and non-aggressive Hispanic middle school students. The University of Texas-Houston, School of Public Health. Thesis.

Figure 1
**Example of a Layout Plan
for a Two-Page, Bilingual Newsletter**

Page 1
Front



Page 1
Back

