

Working Paper 94-6 February 1994[1]

NCJRS

MEDIATING TEEN VIOLENCE IN BOULDER, COLORADO

JAN 18 1995

By Kon Damas  
City of Boulder, Youth Services Division

ACQUISITIONS

I want to briefly describe the City of Boulder program and how we interact with the schools about violence involving school-age children. The City's mediation service, now called the Community Mediation Service, is ten years old. We started out with a small budget, just mediating between landlords and tenants. Since then we have grown substantially. We now use volunteers to help resolve disputes in a wide range of areas: landlord/tenant disputes, neighbor/neighbor disputes, and neighborhood/developer disputes. We also have added a team specifically to deal with the race relations disputes in the City of Boulder. We also have a Youth Services Division, which is the section I currently run.

In Youth Services we deal with any kind of dispute where a teenager is one of the parties. We started with a three-year federal grant for mediating parent/adolescent disputes. Typical issues are curfews, school performance, sex, drugs, rock-and-roll, who your friends are, etc. Kids come to us because they've runaway from home, they've been arrested, or somebody at school has decided that something is wrong with the kid's situation because the kid is either ditching or not attending school, or something else is going on.

When our three-year grant expired, the City decided to pick up the project. We have now expanded to the point where we are doing not only parent/adolescent mediation, but also anything that involves teens, including school-yard fights, teens in victim-offender situations in which the teen is the offender, throwing rocks through a window, minor trespassing, fights between teens in which the police were called, and anything else involving teens and conflict resolution.

The most interesting thing about our service is our use of a co-mediation model. We use two mediators in each situation--we've found that two heads are better than one. And for teen situations, we use teen volunteers--we have one adult and one teenager mediating each dispute. When parents and teens come in, teens typically think, "OK, now all these adults are going to tell me what to do." But when there is a teenager present on the mediation team, the teen has a different attitude about the mediation process. The teen mediator provides a model for the teen involved in the conflict, but also the teenage volunteer can more readily establish rapport with the teen involved in the dispute. Anyone involved in mediation knows that really can work.

In this process, we first get the conflict parties together to talk. By using this process we are usually able to come up with a solution. Often they can convince us that they are not going to get into another fight, which is one of the school's main objectives. But I had to ask myself, "Is there something else that could be done that would eliminate the need for this to happen? Are there ways to prevent teens from fighting with each other?" I think a lot of people say, and part of me certainly believes this, "Kids are going to get into fights. That is natural. It is part of growing up and becoming aware of yourself and your limits; it is establishing pecking orders." But another part of me thinks, as natural as that is, as adults we want these kids to move beyond that. Are they getting lessons on how to resolve conflicts without fighting? I am not sure they are. So I certainly support peer mediation in the schools as a valuable tool.

I didn't take any formal mediation training until I was 33. I wish I had gotten it at 13. How

152397

**U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice**

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this copyrighted material has been granted by

Conflict Resolution Consortium

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the copyright owner.

many of you actually had some training in school on how to handle conflict? Anybody? (Only a few hands were raised.) I know some of my teen volunteers have had it, and it's really great to see that. In fact, let me tell you a little story about a very gratifying event that happened this week. One of my teen volunteers, who attends Boulder High, asked the principal, "How come there is no peer mediation program here?" The principal did not have a good answer. This teen had it at her middle school. She is now working to start one at Boulder High. She's hoping to go to CU, and maybe she will do the same thing at CU, because I don't know if there is a peer mediation program at the University of Colorado either. If we start at a certain grade, even if we don't have pressure from the administration to create these programs, we may have pressure from the students.

I was talking about this at Boulder High all week to 85 kids in a combined class. A lot were totally dumbfounded to hear a lot of the things that I think they should have known, including that the federal government has people they send to resolve disputes between the community and the police and other types of disputes as well. I asked these students, and I probably could have asked the adults too, "Did you know that the City of Boulder has used mediators to resolve disputes between the police and members of the community?" They didn't. Most people don't know we exist, or know what we do. So I hope all of you can help to reduce the stealth aspect of the Community Mediation Service by telling other people about us. We have come up with a new button, which we stole from the National Association of Mediation in Education that says, "When we listen, people talk."

One thing that I have found in schools is that when two kids are put into a mediation setting because they have been fighting, and you get to the options-generation phase of mediation, where you ask what they can do to solve their dispute, they really don't know. They don't have an answer. I think we need to give them hope; that is part of what we do in mediation. We say, "Listen, there are ways to attack this. There are ways to resolve conflict other than punching somebody else in the face or just giving up on it." One quote (which will probably sound familiar to those of you who are mediators), from one particular physical fight involving four kids, came after we asked the person who had thrown the first punch, "Why did you do it? Why did you hit this other person?" Her answer was, "I hit her because she wouldn't listen to me." Now there's a communications tool! Clearly it was not in this student's range of options to communicate if she thought that hitting was really an effective way to get someone to listen to her.

Certainly, in every mediation session we try to help those kind of people understand that there are better ways to get people to listen or to resolve conflicts. We run the kids through the process, and we like to then ask them, "What are you going to do the next time you are in a similar situation and you may end up in a fight?" And if they say, "Well, I don't know," we spend a little more time with them and say, "How about doing what we did today? Identify what the problem is, what the issues are about, think about what you can do to resolve it, and figure out whether you agree or disagree on parts of it, on any of it, and move on." Then we ask them again, "What are you going to do next time?" and we make that part of the agreement between the two people. But kids aren't learning this in the schools. They should be taught that when they are in a conflict, this is how to handle it, and that whether it is two kids or two countries, it can be done. It is certainly logical to add this to the curriculum everywhere.

I was not a history major in college, and I'm not sure I really enjoyed it in high school, but, generally speaking, when I think of my history classes, I remember dates and the names of generals because that is what we had to memorize. I don't remember being taught the name of

people who hammered out treaties, who hammered out agreements that resolved the wars, or people who hammered out the agreements that prevented wars. These things need to be emphasized and integrated into the curriculum-- that conflict can be resolved. Sometimes we have to go to war, but oftentimes, war can be avoided, whether it is on a personal level or on the international level.

Not too long ago we were called in by the City of Boulder Police Chief, Tom Koby, to help talk with some people who felt that the police department hadn't handled a particular situation correctly. It turned out that they were the families of the kids involved in the Paul Kelly beating. This made me think more about this problem because these meetings were very fascinating. We started with a few parents and the police talking about the response, how it was handled, how the press handled it, and what the police should have done differently. But very quickly after that, the police were out of the picture, and we were mediating between the parents and the kids. What evolved, almost naturally, was a circle-of-influence mediation, which turned into a facilitation by having that many people in the room. We had some of the kids involved in that situation, their parents, and the girlfriends of some of the kids and their parents.

They all started talking about the different kinds of issues that were either causes for and/or solutions for the fighting on the Hill and elsewhere in this community. As we started to get into alcohol-related issues, we began talking about the enabling behavior of parents. This was a particularly interesting meeting because it was a powerful situation for some of the kids who identified some of the enabling behavior they saw their parents doing, and some of the other parents doing. It was also very powerful from a facilitator's standpoint, as I could just stand back and acknowledge them and listen to the fascinating conversations around the table.

This situation gave me the idea that we should try to expand our mediation service beyond the one-on-one situation. Wherever there is a problem, when there is a fight between kids, let's get their whole circle of influence into a room and talk about it, so it's not just a confidential agreement between kids--"OK, we're not going to hit one another any more"--but also resonates further into the community. That's basically where we want to head in the next year or so. Part of the way I'm going about accomplishing this is by having more and more teens be part of the program. I am also expanding the model so that we're not just doing person-to-person mediation.

One example of the need for this model is demonstrated by one of our monthly staff meetings. In describing this particular parent/teen conflict there was the tendency among some of our volunteers to say, "Well, yes, sometimes the kid has a problem, but we also need to recognize that oftentimes the parents have a problem, too. In fact, part of this conflict is coming from the parent's problem." One example of this was one particular fight between two kids in which one kid had broken the collarbone of the other. The conflict went through the court system and was then turned over to us. Because the kids were not 18, the parents had to be at the mediation. During the mediation, the dad announced that he was proud of the fact that his child had broken the bone of the other kid, because he had sent his child to a martial arts class. As a mediator, what do you do in a case like this? I wanted to break some of the father's bones! I think this circle-of-influence approach may help in situations like this. If I had expressed my feelings to the father, that would have been one thing, but a circle of parents could have changed this dynamic. By getting a circle of parents together where they can hear each other, community and peer pressure become part of the process.

[1] This paper is an edited transcript of a talk given by Konn Damas for the Intractable Conflict/Constructive Confrontation Project on November 6, 1993. Funding for this Project was

provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the University of Colorado. All ideas presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Consortium, the University, or Hewlett Foundation. For more information, contact the Conflict Resolution Consortium, Campus Box 327, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado 80309-0327. Phone: (303) 492-1635, e-mail: [crc@cubldr.colorado.edu](mailto:crc@cubldr.colorado.edu).

Copyright 1994. Conflict Resolution Consortium. Do not reprint without permission.