

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

**NEWSPAPER CLIPPING:** "It sounds amazing, but research confirms it. The majority of children in our country feel good about themselves, manage their emotions, communicate clearly without whining and talking back and know how to resolve conflicts without using their fists. Bullying and school violence is on the decline as is lying, cheating, stealing and substance use. Juvenile Detention Centers everywhere are remaining completely empty!

Parents and teachers have been cited smiling on a regular basis. An elementary school teacher we spoke with told us, "Wow, I feel like I'm able to make an even greater impact on my students than I ever thought possible! The students seem happier, the class is getting along better, there are fewer problems, I have more time for teaching and their grades are improving!

A student we interviewed gushed "Things are still going so great – I can't believe it! My grades rock! Everybody in school talks to me and I've got some really good friends. I rarely get into arguments and when I do I can totally handle it. I'm even getting along with my parents – we can actually talk! Who would've thought?!"

Experts predict that if this trend continues, we will finally move toward the development of a healthy, high-functioning society!"

**BASICS:** A pipe dream? A fantasy drummed up by a speaker who wants to grab you? No. A true possibility. We can truly help children make healthy, effective, values-based choices, meet their needs in positive ways, build healthy relationships, deal with conflicts effectively and become the best people they can possibly be.

I have no magic wand but a perspective and a process that can make a huge impact. The first step is to look at the larger context in which children operate examining how choices are made as well as the factors contributing to ineffective choices and conflict. Youngsters behave ineffectively in emotional and social arenas because they lack the information and skills to make better choices. We can fill that gap and provide that missing knowledge and build those skills.

Often, in our zeal to fix the problems we see, we go right for the problem, only to see others pop up. This is like putting your finger in a hole in a dyke only to find others leaking out. I am proposing an approach that rebuilds the dyke, that examines the process by which choices are made and uses that knowledge to impact choices in a deep and lasting way.

The approach is based on Glasser's Choice Theory; a Cognitive-Behavioral perspective; Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory, specifically intrapersonal and

interpersonal intelligences; Goleman's Emotional and Social Intelligence theories and the use of interactive approaches based on best practices in Prevention such as techniques borrowed from Moreno's Psychodrama.

Today I will turn all that I just described into plain English, taking apart the steps that lead to ineffective choices and providing the information and techniques with which to help youngsters make better ones.

- **TRYING TO MEET NEEDS**

Step one to a deeper understanding of how we make choices. We are really just a bunch of poor shlubs who are trying to meet our needs. Shlepping along the road of life without a map. Much of the time, we do what we do and after we've done it, we wish we hadn't. Much of the time, what we do doesn't get our needs met and actually gets us the opposite result, but it's all that we know how to do.

- **ALWAYS MAKING CHOICES**

We always have choices about how to meet our needs. We are making choices at every moment about everything we think, feel and do. You've already made hundreds of choices today – whether to go for that slimfast breakfast bar or that donut this morning – okay how many of you went for that donut? You know you want to know! Whether or not to come tonight. Where to sit.

The trouble we have is that most of the choices we make are made on auto-pilot. We are rarely aware that we've even made a choice, or that other choices were possible. Even when we know that we had a choice to make, we often make them by default, "that donut was there", or out of habit, "I know I didn't keep my New Year's resolution to exercise but I will next year" based on going along with others' choices "Okay, since you volunteered me and complemented my baking, I guess I can bake 400 cupcakes for the school dance", or based on faulty information, better known as assumptions.

- **BASED ON ASSUMPTIONS**

These assumptions, or, beliefs without proof, were put together when we were much younger, based on the limited information we had at the time and then rarely questioned. They tell us what to think and how to feel and act, like a running monologue in our heads. They affect very area of our lives, from our emotions to our self-esteem to our relationships.

How many of us, including myself have avoided doing something new because our crystal ball told us that we were going to be awful at it. These assumptions drive

youngsters to feel inadequate because they are not good at something, to put other children down to make themselves feel better.

In order to make more conscious, effective choices, the first step is to be aware of their existence.

## **CHANGING ASSUMPTIONS**

If we want to truly empower youth to make effective, values-based choices, build healthy relationships and handle minimal conflicts which arise effectively, we have to start with changing the assumptions on which the choices are based.

Easier said than done. Here's the tough part. In the blink of an eye, and completely without our awareness, our assumptions inform our thoughts, which immediately lead to our feeling a certain way which is closely followed by our acting in a certain way.

As an example would be a friend calling us to ask for a favor. We are swamped, and the logical choice would be to say no. However we assume that we have to please and be liked by everybody, think that it would be wrong to say no, feel stressed mixed with a dose of guilt and an unbidden "yes" flies out of our mouths.

Children operate the same way. A test is about to be given. A student has the ability to well on the exam, but she assumes that she won't know anything, thinks that she shouldn't even bother trying and feels stressed. The test is handed out, she spends the entire time staring into space and hands in a blank test.

In order to help youngsters make more effective choices, we have to help them push their personal pause button on the VCR of their lives, slowing down the assumption to thought to feeling to action chain. We have to first help them become aware of their assumptions, and evaluate them for exaggerations and other errors in logic.

We did this when I sat with you and voices some assumptions about how I would be as a presenter. Another example would be the assumptions that I might have that would impact how I might enter the room and present.

There are many assumptions that lead to choices that end in conflict. These include assumptions about how angry I believe I have to get when things don't go my way; assumptions about the need to make others feel bad about themselves so that I can feel good about myself; assumptions about there not being enough power to go around so I have to always win in a relationship rather than seeking a win/win solution. We don't have enough time to explore each of these assumptions. However, I will offer an example of a process by which one can help youngsters examine and reframe their assumptions, the thoughts which follow and finally their behavioral choices.

We will be enacting examining and reenacting a series of scenes, reflecting the assumptions that can lead one to be angry more of the time than one might like and to handle anger in ineffective ways. These scenes reflect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors based on a particular assumption. The assumption to be explored is 'It is awful and I must get angry when things don't go the way I want them to go'. The assumption, thoughts, and feelings are highlighted in the actual dialogue of each scene so that the youngsters can see what happens when we press that pause button, slow down, and evaluate our assumptions thoughts and feelings.

### **SCENE 1**

The next step in the process is teaching youngsters to evaluate their assumption, looking for the ways in which their logic is off track. One of these ways is when we assume that we know the future. Does anybody here have a working crystal ball? However, we often act as if we do.

In the previous scene, Alisha believed that her sister has always been and will always be mean to her. The youngsters are taught to look at the probability of their imagined outcomes. It is important to note here that we are not providing children merely with motivational platitudes. We are not asking children to go from a glass half empty mentality to a glass half full, which would be very difficult. Rather, we are asking them to see the possibility of the glass filling up at all, asking them to go from black and white thinking to being able to see shades of gray.

The youngsters can be helped to help Alisha look at a wider range of possibilities such as my sister is sometimes mean and sometimes not. We look at generalizing. Alisha assumes that she has to be furious every time she has a conflict but the youngsters can help her see that she can let some things go, and when they need to be dealt with, to handle them calmly and consistently. And we look at awfulizing. Alisha assumes that it is awful that her sister wants to play with her. The youngsters can help her see that it is not preferable but it is tolerable, that awful might be someone you love being very ill, but that this is not up at the top on a "scale of awfulness". What's the worst thing that could happen? She might have to play with her sister and her friend for a while but that wouldn't be so awful.

The youngsters are then asked to help Alisha arrive at a better belief to have about anger. An example would be, "Sometimes I would like things to be different, but I can let them go or deal with them". Then they are asked to come up with the thoughts, feelings and actions that might follow. "I'd rather play alone with my friend. Maybe I'll explain that calmly to her."

The youngsters are then helped to predict possible consequences, based on the new belief. What do you think Alisha's new belief might have led to? She might have been

able to play with her friend rather than have her sent home. They then get to see if their predictions were right in a new scene that's acted out, based on the new belief. You now can too!

- **SCENE 2**

- **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Acting out scenes based on assumptions, evaluating them, changing beliefs and then rehearsing new thoughts and actions stemming from them offers a powerful and effective process to rehearse making better life choices. We are not merely providing youngsters with alternate behaviors that we are asking them to execute. Rather, we are helping them change their assumptions so that they themselves will see the logic and benefit of making other choices and providing them with the tools to make them. This fundamental process is applied in myriad areas such as dealing with feelings, going from "I must be angry about everything" " to "I can let go of some things", to self-acceptance, going from "I have to make others feel bad about themselves so I can feel good about myself" to "I have many ways to feel good about myself without making others feel bad about themselves", to relationships, going from "I have to have all the power" to "There is enough power for everyone" and issues such as bullying and substance use, finding other ways to be powerful and assertive and better ways to feel good.

Once youngsters can begin to understand and reframe their assumptions, they then have the ability to learn and apply a comprehensive range of life skills which can help them execute increasingly effective choices, such as cooperation, stress management, anger management, communication, and assertiveness. If we provided the skills without the understanding of and motivation to make better choices, the skills would be far less likely to be applied.

## **SKILL-BUILDING ACTIVITIES –**

**Slow Breathing**

**Manipulation**

**Listening and Giving Feedback**

**I Messages**

**Negotiation**

As youngsters are able to deal with their feelings effectively, they stand a greater chance of feeling good about themselves. As they feel good about themselves, they will be more likely to have healthy relationships. As they have healthy relationships, they will have fewer conflicts and be more likely to deal with them effectively when they do occur. Additionally they are likely to make better choices when dealing with issues such as bullying and substance use.

As more and more children grow into adults who feel good about themselves, manage their emotions effectively, communicate clearly, learn how to meet their needs in positive ways and how to resolve conflicts, we are more likely to move as a society toward the development of a healthy, high-functioning civilization.

## **EPILOGUE**

I'd like to share some success stories with you from having used the approach I have shared with a numerous classrooms. I have fond recollections of the second grader who, upon seeing my sad face as I walked down the hall, asked me "Adina, what are you assuming and thinking to make you so sad?" Or when, after a fifth grader answered a question about his behavior with "I had no choice," the entire rest of the class said "Yes, you did." I remember the student who had headaches that doctors were unable to lessen. After she understood that not everything that seems scary is reason to be frightened, she was able to drastically lower her stress level and the headaches disappeared.

I remember the student who said that he puts people down because that's just the way he does things. Struggling with the impending lesson about put-downs, he was told that he did not have to change his ways, merely listen to some options. Following the lesson, he went up to the teacher and asked her to help him learn to stop putting others down. I recall the students who struggled with lying. After being questioned about their values and determining that they believed lying was wrong, they discovered that they lied because they assumed that this was the only way to get their needs met. After learning that they had other options and developing skills in communication and negotiation, their behavior changed dramatically; they were able to make choices in accordance with their values.

I would love to hear your stories. Please feel free to email or call with any questions, requests or ideas. I am excited about the impact that I know you will have on the youngsters with whom you interact and—ultimately—the world in which we all live.

### **LIST OF ACTIVITIES:**

**Choice Walk**

**Barometer**

**Assumption Walk**

**Scenes**

**Skill-Building Exercises**