

Peer Mediators in their families

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Peer Mediation is the approach that the schools involved in this project are using to manage conflicts and disagreements. As you all know, this type of mediation is usually done by students for other students of the same age-group to resolve problems between groups or individuals.

Peer mediation program **trains** selected individuals (the "peer mediators") to develop specific skills useful for mediating conflicts and reaching agreements.

The most used technique of Peer Mediation is **problem solving**, developed by Thomas Gordon*, a humanist psychologist (*he developed the famous approach of "effective communication"*)

Problem solving involves the use of skills such as **empathy**, listening (especially **active listening**), **reformulation** and **use of questions**.

The six stages of **problem solving** to resolve conflicts peacefully and create win-win solutions are:

1. **examination** of the problem,
2. **proposals** for solutions,
3. **assessment** of negative and positive aspects of the proposals,
4. **choice** of most suitable proposal,
5. **implementation**,
6. **verification** of results.

Gordon states that all people need to feel **understood** and **accepted**.

For him, **active listening** is one of the best ways to communicate **acceptance**. Active Listening goes beyond just listening. The goal of active listening is to understand the person's feelings and opinions. In **active listening** the listener uses non-verbal behaviors, such as eye contact and gestures, and verbal behaviors, such as tone of voice, open questions, rephrases and summaries, to offer the speaker attention, listening and understanding.

Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, to see things from their point of view. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they feel.

What skills learnt during this experience can the peer mediators apply in their families?

The peer mediators **cannot mediate** serious conflicts in their families (they are not neutral), but they can introduce a different approach to conflicts. The skills developed during this training (*like active listening, empathy*) could be a positive

example for other family members.

The peer mediators are “not afraid” of **conflict**, they know it is natural and not a war with a winner and a loser. Conflict, well **managed**, can be an **opportunity for growth and development** because dealing with conflict allows individuals and families to move on other evolved stages of life. As you well Know, from conflict we can learn a lot about ourselves and others and we can find creative ways to deal with problems.

Individuals and families evolve also through conflict.

The **Family Life Cycle Theory** developed by psychiatrist Salvador Minuchin** in 1974 states that families, like individuals, go through predictable stages (*individuals form a couple, become parents, children grow up ...*) and unpredictable stages (*divorce, death...*).

Each stage implies a transition. At each stage there are tasks or challenges that must be solved in order to move on to next phase.

The members of the family have different basic **needs** (*survival, self-worth, belonging, self-actualization, power, freedom, fun...*), their needs differ during the transitions among the stages of the family life cycle. During transitions often there are conflicts and tension (*crises*). They are a natural opportunity for evolution, change and growth. **The teenagers**, for example, need to grow and differentiate themselves from parents also through conflict. **”Well-functioning family defined not by the absence of stress or conflict, but by how effectively members handle them”** (S. Minuchin, 1974). The mediators can be an effective role model to handle crises especially for “peer” family members (*like sibling*).

In the family the behaviors of a member affect the balance of the whole family group, so **peer mediation can positively affect all members**. Peer mediators introduce a positive pattern of behavior in their family. They can help generate agreements only on the **sibling (or cousins) subsystem** (*they are peer...*) of the family group for conflicts in which they are more neutral. Any intervention by the son is highly **dysfunctional** if carried out on the **parental subsystem**. **

The mediator “son” will have more tools to avoid siding with one parent at the expense of the other, during critical phases of dysfunctional marital couple. This phenomenon, called **triangulation** (Minuchin 1974), is highly damaging to the psychic balance of the sons (*both spouses are, in fact, their parents...*).

The interventions on **sibling subsystem** can:

- increase the autonomy of sons (*a primary goal of families beyond protection*);
- avoid the risk that conflicts degenerate into violence, following the logic of winner and loser.

Active Listening in family helps the mediator to **recognize their own needs** and others’ needs. It allows the individuals to recognize and express their **emotions** through language. This function is very important as it **prevents** the individual discharging unexpressed emotions through **impulsive and/or violent acting out**.

Turning emotions into “**heard words**” prevents them from becoming out of control actions. When an individual expresses a need, he needs to be heard. Mediation offers this opportunity. In the language of acceptance (*developed by T. Gordon*) that has “positive influence on the individual”, is essential **to listen to the need before satisfying it**. Psychic balance is generated by the adaptation to reality which does not always allow the satisfaction of needs (the habit of saying “no” and tolerating frustration are important **educational principles**). Mediation follows these **principles** because the conflict is healed by a **partial satisfaction of the needs of the two parties**. The mediators learn through their training that family and social coexistence sometimes involves the partial or total renunciation or the review of one's needs.

Reflections As a parent I believe that through this experience the schools involved in this project have focused on the social and emotional education of students to offer them **skills to cope with crises**, conflicts and emotional distresses. These skills are easily transferable to other contexts and are **useful for all stages of life**. This experience helps the mediators to know and **accept the others** without prejudice. In a highly performance-oriented competitive world, mediation focuses on what the person **is** and what he or she expresses. Peer to peer focuses on **us** rather than ego and avoids the win - lose logic. This project has an added value: it, *like a sign of hope*, was carried out by you during the **pandemic** phase, when social relations were absent. It promoted and maintained social skills during a difficult phase for your students.

Thanks to this project we know there is another response to crises, other than “**fight or flight**” response: **mediation**.

*Thomas Gordon, (1962) “Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children”;

**Salvador Minuchin, (1974) “Families and Family Therapy”, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.