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Teaching Peace and Life Skills in Schools: Why Not?

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Schools are our main social avenue of learning. While the primary focus of teaching in schools is predominantly on academic skills, many feel that life skills are equally important.

We face conflict and sometimes violence at almost every stage and in every area of our lives. In fact, conflict that is not dealt with effectively can be one of the biggest detriments to success both in school as well as in life.

While in school, as many as [1 in 3 students report being bullied](#). It wreaks havoc on learning and the social atmosphere and bullied victims are between [2 to 9 times more likely to consider suicide](#). Conflict and violence are a tremendous burden on school administrations and on schools effective functioning.

In the world at large, the grip of violence is daunting. Economically speaking, the [Violence Containment Industry](#) accounts for around \$2.16 trillion, or around 15 percent of U.S. GDP. When adding up the concrete costs to the average American taxpayer it is estimated that violence containment spending costs \$15,000 a year, or \$7,000 for every man, woman and child each year. This is more than a burden, it's a challenge of epic proportions. This is money that would be much better served going towards socially uplifting and nourishing endeavors.

It seems only logical that our nation invest more heavily in prioritizing basic social and emotional learning, conflict resolution education, and peacebuilding skills woven into our core school curriculum to help turn the tide. While proven and effective programs aicum are already happening in pockets all over our nation, they need to be more systemically embedded. Our policies at the local, state and federal levels have the potential to better reflect and empower these options.

Imagine what would happen if millions of our kids grew into adults with better skills to deal with conflict and to cultivate peace. It could fundamentally change our nation and world for the better.

It's encouraging to be aware that these kinds of programs and solutions are already having positive impact. Take a few examples:

- In West Philadelphia High School, within two years of implementing a [Restorative Discipline program](#), incidents of **assault and disorderly conduct dropped more than 65%**.
- [Meditation/mindfulness practices](#) in schools have noticeable benefits -- studies have shown **suspensions decrease by 79 percent, attendance increases by over 98% and academic performance is noticeably increased**.
- Up to **42% reduction in physical and verbal youth violence** through [Life Skills Training](#) in schools.

Here is an overview of empowering strategies and programs with proven efficacy:

Social and Emotional Learning: Teaches self awareness, empathy, impulse control, motivation and social skills. Social and emotional learning is the process through which children (and adults) acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social and Emotional

Learning programming is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging and meaningful.

Communication Skills: Conflict Resolution Education Curriculum is a key modality. Teachers, staff and administrators are trained to integrate conflict resolution and management as a life skill into existing curricula and to facilitate positive change within the school community by aligning school mission statements, disciplinary procedures, and team-building efforts with conflict resolution concepts and theories.

Restorative Circles & Dialogues: This works well right from the start. Children of elementary age start the day in a circle with their teacher. Everyone gets to see each other and do a check-in. In this way, there is space for young ones to share what is happening in their lives. Perhaps a death in the family, a birth, someone in the hospital, divorce... despite the trauma, kids are expected to "behave" and appear normal. Modeling depth is always a good thing and that's where a teacher willing to be vulnerable is helpful.

Restorative Justice with trained facilitator: This is when an offense has taken place on school grounds involving one or more persons. All parties impacted by that situation come together and each is pre-interviewed. It is essential that the "offender" is willing to take responsibility and make things better. Victims must agree as well. Both victim and offender are invited to bring support people with them.

Mindfulness/Meditation: Mindfulness is a simple but powerful technique to focus attention, manage emotions, handle stress, and resolve conflicts. This allows youth to make wiser decisions in the heat of the moment, rather than only in retrospect - and can provide a much more positive school environment.

Peer Mediation: This is Peer-to-Peer mediation and does not involve teachers or adults.

Additional examples include: Nonviolent Communication; bullying cessation programs; quality after-school and out-of-school programming; teaching children about peace and peacebuilding movements and what kind of work is happening around the world; and better school discipline and empowering alternatives to in-school suspension.

Thankfully, there is no shortage of good possibilities to pull from. You can read even more about "[Teaching Peace in Schools](#)" and what is possible, including statistics on what is working and where the challenges are as well as links to great organizations and programs around the nation.

The push to Teach Peace in our schools is being amplified by a new national initiative organized by The Peace Alliance, entitled: "[Be the Movement! Take a Step for Peace: In Your Life, In Our Communities, Among Nations.](#)" Those of us who are working towards these policy shifts are trying to help shape how we organize our society, and our schools are a primary approach to bringing these values to the forefront.

There are a number of key policy areas that could help move this forward. We should include areas above in Common Core guidelines and funding. Include the areas above in state and local school policies and funding. Pass the [Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Act, \(H.R.850\)](#) in the U.S. House of Representatives. Include Restorative Justice and other related programs in U.S. Dept. of Education disciplinary guidelines. We need to implement universal, school-based violence prevention programs at all schools, particularly in neighborhoods highly impacted by violence.

It's time that we give our kids the skills and support they need to thrive at every level of life, not just academically. We also need to provide structures in schools to better deal with conflict and violence. Imagine the world we could build over time if all our kids left schools with a foundation of these basic skills for life. They would function better and live more meaningful and emotionally healthy lives. It would be a real legacy of peace for generations to come.