

## **Communication – Conflicts – Alternative Techniques – As A Good Example of the Supportive Role of Communication in the Fight Against Bullying and as a Tool of Early Problem Recognition**

Erika VÁRADI-CSEMA

### **ABSTRACT**

An important prerequisite for the applicability of children's rights is the recognition of the fact of the violation and the possession of the necessary knowledge. Children's communities – partly due to the lack of information and partly due to peer (group) pressure – are often accepting of offensive, verbal, psychological or physically abusive behaviour. In addition to the family, school provides the most decisive medium for the socialization process, so it would be very important if teachers also reacted with sufficient sensitivity to forms of behaviour that endanger children's rights, with the aim of early problem recognition. Creating an atmosphere of trust with children makes it possible to involve communication-focused methods that help solve problems, resolve conflicts by involving the affected community - and convey clear messages to children. These experiences are not only important in connection with resolving a specific situation or with setting an example, but also because they enable students to behave assertively, to take action against peer abuse, to strengthen their empathetic skills and ultimately contribute to the more effective exercise of their children's rights.

### **KEYWORDS**

school violence, bullying, peer-groups, teacher-student conflict, early problem recognition, mediation, facilitation, alternative conflict resolution

The rights guaranteed by various laws concerning children – and the related obligations of adult society – can only be fully enforced if we manage to identify as early as possible those target groups who are particularly at risk or who need special support to exercise their rights due to their other shortcomings.

Erika Váradi-Csema (2025) 'Communication – Conflicts – Alternative Techniques – As A Good Example of the Supportive Role of Communication in the Fight Against Bullying and as a Tool of Early Problem Recognition' in Erika Váradi-Csema (ed.) *Interdisciplinary and Child-Friendly Communication*. Miskolc-Budapest: Central European Academic Publishing. pp. 215–221. [https://doi.org/10.71009/2025.evcs.iacfc\\_17](https://doi.org/10.71009/2025.evcs.iacfc_17)



## 1. Early Problem Recognition to Prevent the Problem-Behaviour and Victimization

The difficulty of early problem recognition is caused by the fact that the family, which is closest to the child, either does not have sufficient knowledge regarding the correct identification of the signs, or the root cause of the problem itself (whether it is emotional neglect or poorly chosen parenting methods). But beyond this, there may be many other reasons why the parent – although he or she perceives the problem – does not seek help. A sense of shame and the awareness of one's own inadequacy can be a serious inhibiting factor.

Thus, it would be particularly important that the school, which is the other most important living space for children, is able to recognize these problems and provide support that meets the child's needs. In practice, however, this is often not the case – partly due to teachers' lack of communication skills or other obstacles (e.g. burnout). This is particularly worrying because children can easily become victims of bullying within their own peer group in the school environment. However, teachers often either do not take on the task of handling the conflicts that arise in this way (due to a lack of soft skills) or do not choose the most appropriate solution to resolve them.

Partly due to age specificities and partly due to the interdependence of children over a long period of time, small communities can present a myriad of conflict situations. In such situations, the teacher has a duty to prevent the escalation of deepening conflicts between children and to ensure a harmonious, calm classroom atmosphere. However, in the absence of individual sensitivity and aptitude, this can pose a difficulty for teachers who have had no or only theoretical exposure to specific expertise during their training. There are, of course, ways of restoring order and ending conflicts, but this is essentially a repressive, sanctioning reaction, typically within the guidelines and procedures laid down in school rules and disciplinary procedures.

Whether the school offers other alternatives for students who misbehave depends to a large extent on the professional perception of the head of the institution. However, when taking into account, in particular, the classroom situations that are embodied in bullying in schools, which generates serious conflicts, this punitive attitude alone cannot be sufficiently effective<sup>1</sup>. It does not address the root of the problem but covers superficial solutions or reactions that cannot be considered solutions. But for other, non-bullying conflicts, it is also true that traditional institutional responses are generally unable to provide an adequate response.

The main reason for this is that they fail to take into account the age-specific characteristics of the conflict, the interpersonal relationships and the heightened emotional state and sensitivity that are inherent in both prepuberty and adolescence.

1 Csemáné Váradi, 2023b, pp. 51–71.

## 2. Usage of Alternative Techniques to Solve the Consequences of Problem-Behaviour

We are convinced that the real solution would be the inclusion of alternative techniques such as facilitation, mediation or conference models<sup>2</sup>, which are able to help both in resolving problems and preventing the emergence of new conflicts with the means of communication.

In order to promote this, we can find good examples in many countries of resolving school conflicts with alternative methods. As a good practice, we would like to highlight a Hungarian example – due to the extensive nature of the project, the number of people involved, the methodological complexity and the results of the follow-ups. In 2008, the former Ministry of Education and Culture's Secretariat of State for Public Education presented a draft program entitled "The introduction of alternative dispute resolution, interest-based negotiation and restorative techniques in the operational and educational practice of vocational training institutions".

The project had two important benefits. Firstly, it demonstrated their relevance and necessity, as teachers have shown great interest in practice-oriented programmes to strengthen their conflict management techniques, with high satisfaction feedback. The final module was aimed at training multipliers, which enabled participants typically heads of vocational training institutions to incorporate conflict management and alternative dispute resolution techniques into their own school's disciplinary procedures protocol. Thus, and this is another major achievement this approach has been able to continue to work successfully after the programme ended. The need for this among teachers and institutions can be truly felt when we know: over the 3-year project period, 120,000 students in 600 secondary vocational education institutions have been introduced to this approach.

In fact, each alternative conflict management method, although involving different groups of people, relies essentially on the resources that the target group, the student body concerned, possesses. The common theoretical background of all these techniques is based on the belief and assumption that children, with sufficient maturity, are able to express themselves in such situations, reacting responsibly and maturely to the problem with a reinforcing attitude and decision in accordance with the conformist behavioural expectations and values of the majority.

Facilitation and mediation can be most effective in cases where the conflict involves a narrower group; that is, there are typically two or three actors in the story<sup>3</sup>. This also means that these solutions are mainly related to ad hoc, situational conflicts, rather than to protracted, recurrent phenomena such as school bullying.

The school environment can support both and be a definitely useful solution. As teachers themselves are not mediators or facilitators, the involvement of professionals

2 Csemáné Váradi, 2019, pp. 19–30.

3 Ibid., pp. 21–23.

provided by various educational services, or the use of these services of the Education Mediation Service, or possibly other supportive solutions (e.g. NGOs, associations - Partners Hungary, Foresee) may be a genuine solution<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Fight Against Bullying with the Help of Communication

However, given the fact that conflicts between children rarely involve only two or three individuals and typically affect the class as a whole, and the fact that a significant proportion of conflicts are not one-off, but protracted, the solution I have found most effective is the use of community conferencing<sup>5</sup>. The conference model is all about involving all stakeholders in the discussion. In its simplest form, the whole class sits down in a circle and, led by the facilitator, discusses, analyses and interprets the problem together. This is very important because, in addition to the two people involved, between whom the conflict is essentially taking place or who are, for example, the “protagonists” of a school bullying incident the pack leader (the henchmen, if there are any) and the victim the others can also have their say. With the guidance of a good facilitator, it is possible to create an atmosphere where children feel free to speak their minds regardless of whether the bully is in the same circle.

The conference model is also of great importance, for example in tackling harassment cases. The class is given the opportunity to express how unpleasant and disturbing it is for them to experience this on a daily basis; how it affects them emotionally and how they can identify more with the victim. This provides significant psychological support to the victim, while sending a clear message to the perpetrator, typically the pack leader, the active participant. The conference model also provides an opportunity to present a meaningful deterrent to bullying activity<sup>6</sup>. The active harasser engages in this disruptive, abusive, typically verbal behaviour primarily because it gives him/her a sense of prestige and attention, support and leadership that he/she perceives as positive. If the bully is faced with the fact that in practice this is exactly what he/she is not getting, if he/she sees and hears that others are more against him/her and judge him/her negatively rather than look up to him/her, that he/she cannot attain a dominant role in the classroom this way, then the reason for continuing this no longer exists. Obviously, bullying in schools can have many different causes from the active bully's side and can be triggered by serious psychological problems or even psychiatric disorders that require the intervention of a professional. In most cases, however, this is not the reason, but the aforementioned need for attention, positioning and finding a desirable role in the internal hierarchy of the establishment. In such cases, however, the conference model helps to reinforce these negative opinions and enables the establishment to show a sense of unity in the face of the active harasser.

4 See more details about the topic: Váradi-Csema, 2025.

5 Csemáné Váradi, 2014, pp. 67–90.

6 Csemáné Váradi, 2023a, pp. 26–33.

The opinion thus clearly expressed is an immediate demonstration to the class that it is no longer worth pursuing this activity for this purpose.

Adequate sensitivity of the facilitator(s) involved is of paramount importance. With the ability to create a protected psychological environment during the process, so that with the right introductory questions and dissolving techniques, they can partially enable classmates who are not directly involved to open up and express their views. On the other hand, they always have to respond appropriately to the communication challenges at hand with well-targeted questions, so that they can adequately summarise, reflect and thus amplify the community's opinion towards both the victim and the active harasser, the pack leader or the henchmen. Moreover, the method has the great advantage of being able to break down the otherwise typically passive behaviour and attitude which is usually characteristic of the class in such cases of school bullying and through this, to activate them to share their opinions and sometimes persuasively to take a stand in connection with the problematic behaviour and the conflict situations that arise.

There is one more important positive element of the conference model: it is forward-looking as a third structural element of facilitation. In other words, it looks at what can be done to ensure that this does not happen in the future. Since the whole class is involved in the discussion and psychic activation is performed in the early stages with the help of facilitators through well-directed questions, by this time the children become very open and receptive to thinking together about possible solutions. This is what is known as “empowerment”, because it is not a matter of the victim being left alone to tell the typically not “single person” group of bullies what he/she thinks about the bullying. On the other hand, his/her expectation will be that this situation will end as soon as possible, and that the abusers will apologise<sup>7</sup>. It is an opportunity to brainstorm, to engage the collective wisdom. This is because the community concerned will work together to draw up solutions that will support the victim to ensure that similar behaviours do not occur in the future. Moreover, it is also productive to involve children in answering the question of how the active bully or bullying group can make amends for the negative effects they have caused, what commitments they can make to overcome any aggression or anger management problems they may have, or to be able to succeed in other areas (such as sports). This can be a useful and positively valued way of raising awareness or prestige for the purpose for which the bullying activity or behaviour was otherwise originally intended<sup>8</sup>. And in the long term, it has a very important impact on increasing the community's sensitivity and responsiveness which is particularly valuable in view of the general attitudes that can be experienced in the space created by 21st century information and communication technologies, social media, etc.<sup>9</sup>

7 Csemáné Váradi, 2014, pp. 67–90.

8 Csemáné Váradi, 2023b.

9 Csemáné Váradi, 2021, pp. 95–112.

Taking responsibility for your actions is an important part of all alternative techniques. Conversations give the perpetrator the opportunity to experience responsibility and to make amends in some way, face to face with the victim<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4. Focusing on the Experts

The ideal school employs teachers who are sensitive, communicative, committed and attentive to children, using the positive psychology method, but who not only impart laxative knowledge, but also educate and act as a model and role model for children. But this requires harmonious, energetic, balanced and empathetic professionals.

In fact, teachers work with their own personality, body, soul and faith. But how can they maintain this, what can they rely on and where can they draw strength from? Can mediation help this process?

We are convinced that it can whatever the “school” conflict is interpersonal and/or workplace conflict (e.g. with colleagues, parents, head teacher); organisational conflict (specific features of the institutional system); or conflicts with children (where other methods are more likely to be involved).

It is very important to record one more fact in this context. The teachers works with their own personality, their own soul, their “body” and performs their everyday tasks, i.e. his/her ultimate and determining support in coping with difficulties is actually themselves. According to Katalin Borbáth’s study<sup>11</sup>, the results showed that the effectiveness of teachers’ work is closely related to their level of emotional balance, satisfaction, and readiness for joy. And their mental well-being also has a positive effect on the emotional development and activity of students.

Therefore, if we are thinking of a successful, effective school, which can recognize the problem-behaviour of children and their messages, we cannot neglect to pay special attention to the mental well-being of the teachers and to the provision of the support tools referred to above – especially focusing on the strengthening their communicational competences.

10 Bencsikné Baktai, 2012.

11 Borbáth, 2020, pp. 299–317.

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