Helping Students Handle Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, especially on a college campus. Close quarters, stressful experiences, and a multitude of values make the environment prime for challenge and disagreements. Of course, interacting with a diverse group of people also makes for loads of learning!

It’s important for students to remember that conflict itself is neutral. It is the behavior of the individuals experiencing conflict that determines its value. A conflict can impact a person’s emotions, thoughts, ability to learn and engage, and behaviors. How one chooses to deal with a conflict will directly determine the result. Dealing with conflicts in an unhealthy manner weakens relationships and makes getting to the “real issue” more difficult. When dealt with in a positive manner, however, conflict serves as a unique opportunity for growth, understanding, and the strengthening of relationships.

When Mediation is Necessary

Sometimes, a conflict is too difficult for the parties involved to solve themselves. Emotions and irrationality can run high, especially in a roommate situation or a conflict among students living on the same residence hall floor. Home is generally one’s escape. For those living on a college campus, their residence hall is their home away from home. If they are experiencing conflict in that environment, the conflict can become overwhelming.

What is mediation?

Mediation is a flexible, educational process that provides a safe forum for disputing parties to express themselves and resolve differences. During a mediation, a neutral third party facilitates a conversation between disputants. The people involved choose to be there; mediation is a voluntary experience where the disputing parties come to communicate their feelings and negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution.

The person or team serving as the mediating party ensures that each person has equal opportunity to voice perspectives, clarify issues, and explore options for resolution. Mediators do not act as judges and they do not take sides. Their goal is to facilitate, guide, and encourage an exchange where the disputants come to their own conclusions. The mediation process is typically confidential and takes place in a neutral location.

Although many students are hesitant to go through a mediation process at first, the process works. Mediation is successful in almost 90 percent of cases, according to some researchers. When handled well, it’s a process full of respect, integrity, and compromise.

Where can my student go for mediation?

On many campuses, Resident Assistants (RA) are trained as mediators. If your student is experiencing a roommate or hallmate-related issue and is comfortable with his RA, encourage him to ask the staff member to conduct a mediation.

If your student is not comfortable with or does not have an RA, there are plenty of other resources available. An Ombudsperson can assist students who are experiencing a conflict with an office, department, or faculty member. Additionally, residence life professionals, counseling centers, a dean of students, or community conflict team can help. There are many people who are here to help your student learn to handle conflict positively and productively.

Five Tips for Handling Conflict

Whenever possible, students should be encouraged to handle conflict on their own. Here are five tips they can utilize in conflict situations:

1. Know the difference between your principles and your preferences.
2. Review your expectations. Are you being realistic? Is the person capable of changing in the way you desire? Can you adapt to the situation or is it totally unacceptable?
3. Listen! Hear the other person’s feelings as well as arguments. Don’t interrupt.
4. Accept the right of the other person to a satisfactory solution to the problem. Recognize that this person has legitimate rights that must be respected.
5. State your opinions and feelings frankly but calmly. Be assertive, not aggressive.
The Odd Couple
When Roommates Don’t Get Along

When your child starts college he may know his roommate because they went to high school together and requested each other, or his roommate might just be a brand new face in the crowd. In either case, soon they will know more about each other than they ever thought, such as who snores or likes to wake up to loud music. Some of these roommate pairs will become fast friends. Others might even find a way to share the room, but keep to themselves. Unfortunately, the other possibility is that they just can’t get along.

In that last situation, there can be many reasons that contribute to their demise as roommates. For example:

- Too many guests or overnight visitors.
- Using each other’s things without asking.
- One likes quiet to study. The other likes to have the radio on.
- Different expectations of what a roommate will be (just someone to live with vs. new best friend).

The list could go on and on. As a parent, it’s hard not to step in, particularly if you see your child’s roommate as the cause of all of the problems. However, remember a few things first:

- Be supportive. Ask questions that get to the heart of the issue. Ask for specific examples of when problems have occurred.
- It takes two. Ask questions about your child’s behavior to help understand if he is part of the problem.
- Encourage communication. Maybe his roommate doesn’t even realize that his behavior is a problem. Role-play it over the phone. Have your student tell you what he would say to his roommate.
- Give them the tools. Instead of jumping in to “solve” a roommate issue, help your student figure out how he can address the issue instead. This type of resolution tends to go more smoothly than one where parents get involved. Plus, it helps your student take responsibility while learning to take positive action.

If your child has tried to work it out on his own and he isn’t getting any satisfaction, suggest the following staff people to talk with:

- The Resident Assistant. The RA is most likely trained in mediation and can help roommates compromise.
- Peer Mediators. Have him check with the Wellness Center or Student Development office to find out if there are peer mediators on campus. These people will be specifically trained in helping students resolve a conflict.
- Residence Life. If the behavior is illegal, unethical or could potentially cause harm, encourage your student to contact a Residence Life staff member immediately. The Residence Hall Director or Area Coordinator of his hall or community lives right there, ready to help. He can also call or visit the Residence Life office to provide a first-hand account of the situation. The staff will work with your student to determine whether a room change is necessary (or even possible) and can help finalize that process.

What Might Cause Problems?

Sharing a room in college can be an adjustment, especially if your child has always had a space of her own. You know your child well and might be able to guess at issues that could cause friction with a new roommate. You might brainstorm some things that could cause problems.…

- Cleanliness of the room
- Sharing things, everything from food to clothes
- Quiet times versus when it is okay to have friends visit

In the midst of talking about what your child expects her room to be, discuss some alternatives and possible solutions, should issues arise. This will help her offer compromises to her roommate so their difference of opinion doesn’t lead to a battle of wills.