

Conflict

The purpose of this introductory lesson is for students to understand conflicts in society, both the causes of conflicts and historical methods of resolving conflicts. This will prepare them to begin learning about the role of the court system in resolving conflict.

Students will:

1. Understand and define conflict and give examples.
2. Understand historical conflict resolution methods.
3. Understand causes of conflict.

Materials needed: Copies of **Student Handout: YESTERDAY'S WAYS**

Time needed: 1 class period

Grade level: Grades 5-12

Procedure:

1. Give an example of an everyday type of conflict we all experience or use a cartoon overhead illustrating a conflict to focus the discussion. Ask students to define conflict. What are essential characteristics of a conflict? (Involves more than one person; opposing goals, interests, viewpoints; need to resolve; etc.). Remind students that conflict is natural and inevitable. Tell them that conflict can often be constructive if it is used to improve our institutions and supports individual growth.
2. Ask students to brainstorm a list of conflicts that might arise in their homes, schools, communities, and the world. Looking at this list, ask them to identify and explain the causes of the disputes (for example, competition for limited resources, aggressive nature of human beings, misinformation, cultural influence, semantics, habit, clashes of values, resistance to change).
3. Discuss historical methods of resolving conflict. Ask students to read the **Student Handout: YESTERDAY'S WAYS**. Using the *Black's Law Dictionary* definition of fairness, explore the fairness of each method.

Black's definition of fairness

Having the qualities of impartiality and honesty; free from prejudice, favoritism, and self-interest. Just, equitable; even-handed; equal, as between conflicting interests.

Procedure cont.

4. Tell students that a method of resolving conflict might be effective, that is to say the conflict may be over, but the solution might be very unfair. What happens when this is the case?
5. Ask students to analyze their own ways of resolving conflict. Are any of them similar to the historical methods? Are they effective? Why or why not?

Student Handout: YESTERDAY'S WAYS

Today we are accustomed to looking to the courts to help settle conflicts in our society. But it wasn't always that way. Throughout history, we have used a variety of conflict resolution methods including the following.

Blood Feud - "An eye for an eye"

Many societies have defined justice as retribution or getting even by taking "an eye for an eye." In other words, if Mack and John are arguing and Mack hits John, it would only be fair for John to hit Mack back. But what if Mack kills John? What would be fair then?

Under this method, it would seem logical that there should be a life for a life. For justice to prevail, John's friends or family must kill Mack. If John's friend, Ron, kills Mack, then Mack's friend, Jack, would have to kill Ron. And so on. What is the result? Many people die, and no one is certain if the initial argument is settled. This situation, a series of murders for revenge, is called a blood feud.

Trial by Combat - "Might makes right"

Another method of conflict resolution took place during the Middle Ages. Instead of a courtroom to determine right from wrong, the battle for truth was fought through arranged fights between knights. These fights would settle arguments between kings, earls, barons and counts as well as determine guilt for a crime.

Each knight would represent a party in the conflict. As the combat began, they would charge at each other while riding armored horses. Swinging lances and maces, each knight tried to knock the other down or kill his horse. On the ground, the knights would fight with swords and shields until these weapons were too heavy to carry. Dropping their shields, daggers were drawn and the fight continued until one knight died or a plea of mercy was accepted. Either way, the decision was final with the strongest knight winning the argument.

Do we ever use a similar method today?

Trial by Ordeal - "God protects the innocent"

Another method to settle arguments used in the past was trial by ordeal. The person accused of wrongdoing was required to prove innocence by enduring great pain without getting hurt. For example, the accused would have to carry red hot metal or pull a ring from a pot of boiling water. Because God was personally involved in the justice system and would protect the innocent, people believed that an innocent person would be able to stand incredible physical pain. If they could not, they were guilty.

Trial by Oath - "A swearing contest"

An ancient Anglo-Saxon law states that as "a matter of supreme importance every man shall abide carefully by his oath and pledge." Failing to tell the truth or breaking a promise would result in horrible consequences: loss of property, crops, animals, or death. Since a person's word was so valuable, crimes could be tried through the swearing of oaths.