The Conflict Resolution Model was formulated by a group of Australian psychologists who set about integrating the literature on achieving mutually beneficial outcomes in a conflict situation in order to create a best-practice prescriptive process for conflict resolution. A number of experimental studies conducted at the University of Tasmania with students and school-aged children have found significantly improved outcomes in resolving conflict following training in listening, assertiveness, and problem-solving skills identified in the model. These skills are also core elements of the theory of healthy relationships formulated in 1970 by Thomas Gordon and implemented in Parent Effectiveness Training (PET). Research on both programs is presented here.

One of the key concepts in conflict resolution is the win-win solution. Older approaches were based on the concept of distributive bargaining, where the best joint outcome that could be achieved was a fair division of benefits in which one person’s gains were another’s losses. This approach engages competitive rather than cooperative processes (Deutsch, 1973) and leads, at best, to compromise. On the other hand, a win-win solution arrived at by integrative bargaining may be close to optimal for both parties.

An example of a win-win solution may be provided by a long-running family conflict between a father and his 14-year-old daughter regarding feeding her pet guinea pigs. There were frequent family arguments, typically involving several reminders from the father that the guinea pigs had not yet been fed, and the daughter responding with procrastination and complaints about being nagged. The daughter wanted to assert her independence and felt that her father was being obsessive. Her father, on the other hand, had strong moral convictions about the timely feeding of domestic pets; he was also concerned about his deteriorating relationship with his daughter. The final solution involved placing a brick on the cage that was labelled “fed morning” and “fed evening” on opposite sides and turned when the guinea pigs were fed. If the guinea pigs had not been fed, the father had the option of simply feeding them himself and turning the brick. This was a satisfactory solution to both parties and eliminated the arguments between them.
The Conflict Resolution Model

In many conflicts, the underlying issues are not clearly recognized by either party. Optimal solutions can only be found by going beyond the initial bargaining positions of the participants to explore these underlying needs and concerns with the expectation of being able to generate creative alternatives that more adequately address them. One method of achieving this is provided by the Conflict Resolution Model. I have designated the Conflict Resolution Model discussed here as CRM-A (A for Australian) to acknowledge that it is only one of a variety of possible prescriptive models for resolving conflict. Although there is generally a high degree of overlap among such models, it would be premature to assign a particularly privileged status to any one formulation.

The CRM-A has four main stages: developing expectations for win-win solutions, defining each party’s interests, brainstorming creative options, and combining options into win-win solutions. A schematic form of the model is presented in Figure 1. In this schematic, I have placed the stage of developing expectations for win-win outcomes at the head of the model because it relates not only to individual experiences in conflict situations, but also more generally to the prevailing culture and relationship context. I also prefer using the term concerns rather than the more legal or rights-based concept of interests, but it should be treated as simply a generic term to encompass the motivational spectrum of needs, hopes, wishes, interests, concerns, and fears.

Developing expectations for win-win solutions

Often, people in a conflict situation assume that the result of a negotiation is that one will win and the other will lose. In such a case, it is necessary to reframe the process in terms of cooperative problem solving with a view to arriving at a mutually satisfactory conclusion.

Defining the issue in terms of underlying concerns, needs, or interests

To arrive at a win-win solution, it is usually counterproductive to focus on positions. This generally leads to arguments based on rights. It is easier to reconcile underlying concerns, needs, or interests (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1997). Explain your own concerns, needs, and interests clearly but not provocatively. To keep the cooperative frame it is important to avoid criticism, blaming, or threatening. The likelihood of a satisfactory outcome is improved when each person feels listened to and valued. Listening skills such as empathy, summarizing, and attentive body language facilitate this communication (Egan, 1986).

Brainstorming creative options

The next stage is to brainstorm creative options that address the concerns of both participants. Buyer (1988) indicates that instructions encouraging quantity, variety, and deferment of judgment generate a greater number of higher quality solutions than no instructions or alternative approaches.

Combining options into win-win solutions

Select the best ideas from the brainstormed list and combine them in order to address as much as possible all the needs, concerns, and interests of the participants. Among the strategies that may be considered are increasing overall resources, reducing the cost of the agreement to a disadvantaged party, and conceding on lesser-valued issues in multi-issue disputes. If agreement is not reached, the area of disagreement is identified and the process is repeated.

Developing a best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA)

A BATNA differs from a bottom line, which is the least acceptable negotiated compromise. As an alternative, it reduces dependence on a negotiated solution, thereby potentially giving a party more power in the negotiation process. However, too much focus on BATNAs may undermine the cooperative process of searching for a win-win solution.

Other approaches

The CRM-A differs from the approach of Fisher et al. (1997) in avoiding explicit reference to objective criteria or principles of fairness. Littlefield et al. (1993) do not explicitly incorporate this approach as they see it as a form of rights-based negotiation that is less likely to achieve a win-win solution. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that more
Figure 1. The Conflict Resolution Model. Adapted from Littlefield et al. (1993, p. 81).
theoretical work is necessary to clarify the potential value of objective criteria. The skills in the CRM-A all overlap with those of another prominent Australian model, the 12 Skills Model of the Conflict Resolution Network (Hollier, Murray, & Cornelius, 1993).

Tasmanian Research on the Conflict Resolution Model

The efficacy of the CRM-A as a model for training in the skills and process of conflict resolution has been the focus of four experimental studies at the University of Tasmania, three with university students (Davidson & Versluys, 1999; Dinelli & Davidson, 2000; Feeney & Davidson, 1996) and one with secondary school students (Davidson & Versluys, 2000). The co-authors of the various studies were students undertaking Honors or Masters Programs in Psychology. These investigations share a number of common features. Each had two phases: a training phase, in which experimental participants were trained in the communication skills and process of conflict resolution according to the CRM-A, and a test phase. To assure the quality of the training in communication skills, the student researchers undertook prior training at local mediation or voluntary counseling centers. Primary training materials used were overheads illustrating the CRM-A, materials from the Conflict Resolution Network Manual (Hollier, Murray, & Cornelius, 1993), and illustrations provided by the experimenter conducting the training.

In the test phase, trained participants were paired with other participants, some of whom were untrained. Prior to the test phase participants completed a questionnaire in which they expressed their views about a numbers of topics of social interest (e.g., compulsory student union fees, duck shooting, smoking in public places). They were then paired on the basis of having opposing views on one of the topics, and were required to discuss the issue and arrive at a joint recommendation on how the issue should be handled. The interaction in the test phase was either videotaped or audiotaped with the consent of the participants. The participants were rated individually by independent raters on the communication skills that had been part of the training. The raters were unaware of which participants had received training. In addition each pair was rated on its success in arriving at a win-win solution to the conflict resolution task.

In the initial study conducted by Feeney and Davidson (1996), 48 volunteer students were randomly allocated to a trained or an untrained condition. Training consisted of three 3-hour sessions held over 3 weeks. In the test phase, there were 6 pairs with both participants trained, 12 pairs with one trained and one untrained participants, and 6 pairs where neither of the participants had received training. Four skills were assessed for each individual based on the videotape of the conflict resolution: cooperation, appropriate assertiveness, active listening, and brainstorming options.

In each case the trained participants showed significantly higher skill levels than those who were untrained. In brainstorming only, participating with a trained partner also improved performance over being paired with an untrained partner. When the overall performances of the pairs were assessed, pairs where both participants were trained outperformed those with only one trained participant. The average performance of pairs where only one participant was trained was also significantly better than pairs where neither was trained. It was notable that there was much greater variability in the outcome where only one of the pair was trained.

Attempts to isolate specific training components

One of the issues of concern to participants was whether conflict resolution training would be helpful in achieving beneficial outcomes if the other person was untrained. The favorable results of the first experiment reassured us on this point. The specific effects of training, however, remained unclear.

The next experiment conducted by Davidson and Versluys (1999) set out to determine the separate effects of training in cooperation (expectations for a win-win solution, active listening, appropriate assertiveness) and problem solving (identifying interests and brainstorming). Forty participants were randomly allocated to training or no training on each of the two components in a 2 x 2 factorial design. The training sessions were only 1 hour. The remaining 40 participants from the initial pool served as untrained partners in the test phase. The final discussions were videotaped and rated blind by two independent raters on the 5 skill measures and the outcome measure.
Analysis of the results showed significant improvements on all skills following cooperation training. Following training in problem solving, there was significant improvement in developing expectations of win-win solutions, active listening, and brainstorming, although further analysis showed brainstorming improved significantly only for the group receiving both cooperation and problem-solving training. Both training conditions produced a significant improvement in the final outcome measure.

While the preceding experiment demonstrated that the effects of even brief training in the CRM-A were surprisingly robust, the experiment failed to demonstrate specific effects of particular types of training. One possibility that could not be eliminated was that the effect of the training had been primarily motivational, encouraging trained participants to use existing skills more effectively, rather than providing them with new skills. In an ambitious attempt to resolve this issue, Dinelli and Davidson (2000) engaged 152 first-year students in a randomized experiment with four groups: the primary experimental group with 2 hours of conflict resolution training as in the previous study, a group who received a 2-hour program that focused on motivational enhancement but provided no skills training, a group in which each pair was assisted by the presence of a trained mediator but were themselves untrained, and an untrained control group. In the test session each participant was paired with an untrained partner. The discussion between each pair was videotaped and rated blind by independent raters.

Those trained in conflict resolution skills performed significantly better than all other groups on the process measures of developing expectations of win-win solutions, appropriate assertiveness, and brainstorming. In addition, the conflict resolution group performed significantly better on the outcome measure than did the untrained group, but no other differences were statistically significant. The possibility that the final outcome was due to differences in the effect of motivation rather than the acquisition of particular skills could not be definitely excluded, and the findings were presented in a conference paper of which only the abstract was published (Dinelli & Davidson, 2000).

Further light will be shed on the skills versus motivation issue by a complementary series of experiments to be discussed shortly.

Conflict resolution training within a school setting

Because the preceding studies were conducted with university students, it seemed appropriate to assess whether similar results could be obtained with secondary school students. In a second study Davidson and Versluys (2000) recruited 48 participants from a secondary school, though randomization was not possible within timetable constraints. Intact classes received 12 hours of conflict resolution training over a 3-week period or acted as controls. Students were tested in pairs in three conditions: trained-trained, trained-untrained and untrained-untrained. The trained participants obtained significantly higher scores on active listening, appropriate assertiveness, mapping the conflict, and designing options. In addition, interacting with a trained partner produced significantly elevated scores in active listening, mapping the conflict, and designing options. On the outcome measure the trained-trained pairs obtained the highest mean scores, though not significantly higher than pairs in which only one participant was trained. Both these groups obtained significantly higher mean outcome scores than the pairs with both participants untrained. It may be concluded that there are at least short-term gains from conflict resolution training with secondary school students.

Conflict Resolution in the Context of Relationships

It has already been noted that the first step in the Conflict Resolution Model is to create expectations of achieving a win-win solution. Such expectations are clearly influenced by the nature of the relationship and the culture of the family, school, or social unit. Cooperative relationships characterized by mutual respect are conducive to a problem-solving approach to achieve mutually satisfactory outcomes. There is a substantial body of evidence in support of the dual concern model described by Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim (1994). This model hypothesizes that problem-solving approaches are most likely to occur when there is high concern
for both self and other. On the other hand, exclusive concern for self favors contention; exclusive concern for the other is consistent with yielding; and low concern for both is related to avoidance.

One of the first theorists to locate conflict resolution processes within a theory of healthy relationships is Thomas Gordon, who developed Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) (Gordon, 1970), Teacher Effectiveness Training (TET) (Gordon, 1974), as well as other forms of Effectiveness Training for leadership, youth, and others. Gordon studied counselling psychology under Carl Rogers, who exerted a profound influence, but he came to believe that education rather than remediation was necessary for the development of relationship skills.

Communication Skills in PET

The PET course consists of eight weekly sessions of 3 hours each. The three major groups of skills taught are concerned with empathic listening, (Active Listening), assertiveness skills (presented as “I-Messages”), and skills for Conflict Resolution and family problem solving. Basic to the course is the insistence on its presentation by trained instructors, who provide detailed skill practice in a group setting, offering additional support for participants.

Active listening

Active listening is based on Rogers’ listening skills, which have profoundly influenced clinical practice. Active listening is a foundation skill in PET, taught intensively over two sessions and reinforced throughout the course. It is not a skill that is generally acquired without training. Parents are also taught that when they are communicating with a child who is emotionally disturbed by a problem, they should avoid 12 typical responses (designated as roadblocks to communication). These responses include ordering, warning, moralizing, arguing, blaming, judging, name-calling, analyzing, probing, sarcasm, and even reassuring and praising. There are, of course, situations where most of these are perfectly legitimate (generally when the other is not upset over a personal problem). It is pointed out, however, that name-calling and sarcasm are almost always destructive and best avoided in personal relationships.

Appropriate assertiveness

The effective parent is assertive, and the key to appropriate assertiveness in PET is self-disclosure (Jourard, 1971; Salter, 1949; Zener, 1988). Self-disclosure helps both personal self-awareness and the understanding of others. It enables a parent to be honest and clear with her children, and incidentally to model these desirable attributes. It also joins with empathic listening to model openness, which in turn, is part of constructing a climate of trust. Parental assertiveness is the skill needed to confront a child’s unacceptable behavior. The first tool for confrontation is assertion, in this case the “I-Message,” in which the parent first describes the unacceptable behavior without blame, then the parent’s honest feelings about it, and the consequences to the parent in terms of cost (e.g., time or money).

Conflict resolution and problem solving

In 1962 Gordon adapted Dewey’s method of problem solving (Dewey, 1933, 1938) to create a “no-lose” method of conflict resolution with six sequential steps. A pioneer of so-called win-win methods, it combines the attempt to meet people’s legitimate needs (Maslow, 1970) with “brainstorming” (Maier, 1960; Osborn, 1963) and the consideration of all possible solutions as put forward by Dewey.

The six steps used for conflict resolution in PET are:

1. Defining the problem in terms of needs
2. Generating possible solutions
3. Evaluating the solutions
4. Deciding on a mutually acceptable solution
5. Implementing the solution
6. Evaluating the solution at a later date

The CRM-A and PET

It is clear that there is a high degree of overlap between the process of conflict resolution proposed in the CRM-A and the process proposed in PET, in particular the concept of a win-win or no-lose solution, problem solving based on needs, and active listening to understand the needs and concerns of the other party. Both recognize the necessity of appropriate assertiveness, although this is
more specifically defined in PET by means of “I-messages.” PET also addresses a wider spectrum of communication and relationship issues. Nevertheless the overlap in the skills and processes related to conflict resolution is so substantial that the PET model of conflict resolution may be thought of as a particular implementation of the CRM-A. Accordingly, research on skills acquisition and conflict resolution in PET is also relevant to this model of conflict resolution.

Research in Skills Training Using PET

There is a considerable body of evaluation studies of PET, although there appears to be a dearth of recent research. Studies prior to 1990 have been integrated by Cedar and Levant (1990) in a meta-analysis that found that PET had an overall mean effect size of .328, which although moderate, is significantly larger than that of the alternative treatments to which it has been compared (.138). This translates to a finding that the average person participating in PET is better off than 63% of those who do not. Three PET evaluation studies at the University of Tasmania have particular relevance to the CRM-A.

Wood and Davidson (1987) conducted a small training study in which a free-response paper and pencil test was used to assess skills of active listening, appropriate assertiveness, and conflict resolution of 9 parents in a PET group and 10 control parents. Differences between the PET and control parents prior to the course were negligible. The parents engaged in PET showed significantly better performances on all three skills at posttest and also at a 3-month follow-up. This study is of particular interest because it was possible to locate and re-test 8 of the 9 PET parents and 9 of the 10 control parents after a time lapse of 7 years (Wood & Davidson, 1994/1995). After this period there were still significant differences between the groups on all three measures. The gains achieved by the PET parents and retained after 7 years were about half the gains they had achieved immediately after training. This study suggests that PET training results in changes in skills and behaviors rather than simply in motivation.

To replicate the findings using a behavioral measure, a subsequent study (Wood & Davidson, 1993) used 13 parent-teenager pairs who received, respectively, PET or Youth Effectiveness Training. There was also a control group consisting of 11 parent-teenager pairs who did not receive training. PET skills were evaluated by independent raters from a videotaped interaction of a conflict resolution scenario entitled “Going to Grandma’s.” Experimental participants again obtained significantly higher scores on measures of active listening, appropriate assertiveness, and conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been on the development of individual orientations to a win-win approach to conflict resolution and the result of training in relevant skills that are thought to optimize the outcomes for the persons involved. We have recognized, but not addressed, the existence of systemic and cultural factors that determine the social context within which conflict resolution takes place, and which predispose participants to cooperative or contentious resolution strategies. The major findings that emerged from these studies are summarized as follows:

- Even short periods of training in the conflict resolution model have been found to produce significantly better mutual outcomes in conflict resolution test interactions. The initial benefit is probably due to the change of orientation towards achieving a win-win solution, having an effective strategy to achieve this goal, and the increased motivation this brings.
- Substantial periods of training and practice, such as those typical of PET programs, produce longer-term changes in the acquisition and utilization of skills appropriate to conflict resolution.
- Gains in achieving better mutual outcomes are not dependent on both participants being trained; they also occur in interactions between a trained and an untrained participant. Training of both participants, however, produces better and more consistent results.

Most of the studies have found some diffusion of skills and attitudes, with untrained participants exhibiting higher levels of some skills or behavior appropriate to conflict resolution when they interact with a trained partner.
It is fitting to conclude with a remark by Mary Parker Follett, a pioneer of integrative negotiation in the 1920s and 1930s: "Perhaps the greatest obstacle to [using] integration [to resolve conflict] is our lack of training for it" (Davis, 1989, p. 227).

References