

**Talking it Out:  
The Peer Mediation  
Program at Six  
LAUSD Schools  
- Jill Frank**

Question: Do you plan to be a Peer Mediator at your school? Why or why not?

Answer 1: I do, because I want to help people that have problems.

Answer 2: Yes I do! I want to because you get popular while you are helping people.

Answer 3: Yes, because I learned how to handle my stress.

Answer 4: Yes, because in the class we were peaceful and I learned more.

- 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students  
in the Peer Mediation  
Program at  
L.B. Weemes Elementary  
School



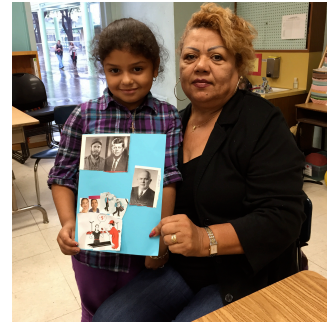
Student receives her Peer  
Mediation Certificate of  
Completion

“My mission is to have a mediator on every block,” says Avis Ridley-Thomas, Co-Executive Director of the Institute for Nonviolence in Los Angeles ([www.invla.org](http://www.invla.org)).

When Avis founded the Dispute Resolution Program in the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office in 1989, the idea that people could work out their differences simply by learning to communicate better, and by listening to each other, was a notion that most communities had never considered. People who were involved in a dispute were accustomed to calling the police, or, to taking matters into their own hands and resorting to violence.

In the course of more than two decades, Avis and her staff trained over 2,000 volunteer community mediators. “We offered an alternative, which was an option for folks to air their issues in a neutral environment and to have their side of the story heard. With the help of the

trained volunteer mediators, in 99% of the cases, people were able to come to agreements that largely and lastingly diffused whatever the original dispute was about.”



Grandmother and daughter  
with Conflict Collage at  
Norwood Elementary School

Now retired from the city and continuing on her mission to install mediators on every block, Avis has designed the Peer Mediation Program for K – 12 schools. The program is currently being offered in six South Los Angeles schools, all in the vicinity of USC, thanks to a grant from the USC Good Neighbors Campaign. So far this year, INVLA has provided Peer Mediation Training to more than 120 students, parents, and staff.

Susan Buckner, one of the trainers, says "I've been impressed with how insightful and dedicated our core of student mediators are." When students get involved in a dispute (the topics range from bullying and cyber-bullying, to 'he-said-she-said,' to petty theft and more), anger and frustration builds and spills out into classrooms, the schoolyard, and beyond.



Students learn to work through the issues using the ITUNA process

Having the option to take their cases to Peer Mediation, "...the students feel like there is someone there who is really listening, and it makes them realize that maybe they can get along better- or at least respect each other a bit more- now that they know how the other person feels. Also, they learn that there is no stigma attached to asking your peers to help you

out. And this is often much less scary- and more effective in the long run- than having to talk about your problems with an adult." (Alan Seitz, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Counselor at Foshay Learning Center)

During five 1-hour training sessions, students learn the ITUNA Process. ITUNA stands for Introduction, Talking, Understanding, Negotiation, and Agreement. Through role-plays and hands on exercises where participants create Mood Meters and Conflict Collages, students become better listeners and communicators. Parents and staff are encouraged to take the training along with their students, or in separate sessions offered by INVLA. Emphasis is placed on social emotional learning (SEL). The students learn that it is ok to have emotions, and once they identify how they feel, they are able to talk about it. This helps them to view their disputes more objectively and to put the challenges

that they may be experiencing into context, whether the situation is happening at school, at home, or elsewhere.

The Peer Mediation Program integrates social emotional learning as an essential framework for the mediation process, and for life.

In keeping with the restorative justice model, schools are encouraged to offer participation in Peer Mediation as an alternative to suspension, thereby improving long-term outcomes for students who might otherwise become caught up in the 'schools to prison pipeline,' when no constructive interventions are employed.

Ms. Yvonne Edwards, principal at Foshay Learning Center, appreciates how the Peer Mediation training program helps to create a safer and calmer environment on campus: "There is a direct impact for us with the kids receiving this training and then volunteering to help

their friends. They are learning to communicate non-violently; they can talk it out, not fight it out. They are learning skills that will help them to successfully manage many different challenging situations that they will doubtless experience throughout their lives.”



Foshay students attend Peer Mediation Invitational, with volunteer trainer Connie Boukidis and 6<sup>th</sup> grade counselor Alan Seitz

We are often asked how we can tell that the program is having a positive impact on the lives of students, and the greater community. Constance Boukidis, one of the trained volunteer mediators, reported to us: “Rafael (not his real name), a 6<sup>th</sup> grader, was involved in a few mediations last year. The issue was about teasing. The sessions were difficult for both the individuals involved, and the peer mediators. An adult supervisor was present, as is the case

during all mediations. The two brief sessions (one half hour each) led to a cessation of the teasing and a new mutual understanding between the parties.”

This year, Rafael returned to the Peer Mediation Program, not as a disputant but to take the training himself, so that he could become a peer mediator and help other students as he had been helped.

“When we have a success story like this one, I know that we are making an impact. Children bring the peace-making skills and communication skills that they learn in the Peer Mediation Program back to their communities, and it often changes the behavior- in a positive way- of all those with whom they come in contact. Students and their families begin to make different choices, choices that result in positive life outcomes.” (Avis Ridley-Thomas).

Are there logistical challenges at each of the school sites with regard to the

consistent implementation of the Peer Mediation Program, after the initial training sessions are completed? Of course there are. But the challenges become immaterial when we recognize that at a crucial stage in the development of these children and teens, an important new vocabulary is being transmitted into the neighborhoods of South Los Angeles, a vocabulary of “talking it out, not fighting it out.”



Peer Mediation Culmination ceremony at John Muir Middle School

For more information about the Peer Mediation Program and [www.INVLA.org](http://www.INVLA.org), contact

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