

NVC in Education Contents



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NVC in Education

Sharing the Field

A Nonviolent Communication (NVC) trainer was teaching NVC to teachers and students at an elementary school. One day while she was there, a conflict occurred on the playground between two groups of boys. It provided an opportunity to demonstrate how NVC skills can be used to mediate conflicts by helping people hear each other's feelings and needs.

It was towards the end of the lunch break and a small group of teachers were on the playground talking with the NVC trainer. Two boys between the ages of 10 and 12 came running up to the NVC trainer. The bigger boy was red in the face and holding tightly on to a ball. The other, smaller, boy was crying.

NVC Trainer (turning, first, to the boy with the ball, and guessing his feelings): You look very excited and upset right now!

Boy 1: Yes. I wanted to play, and because of him (pointing to the other boy) I couldn't.

NVC Trainer (hearing his needs and reflecting them): So, you wanted to play and have time with your friends, and this didn't happen?

Boy 1: Yeah, he came and he broke into our game and he wanted to take the ball and we told him many, many times to go away. It's not their time to play now.

NVC Trainer (turning to Boy 2 to see if he was able to hear Boy 1's needs): Can you tell me what you hear him say his needs are?

Boy 2: Yeah, they don't want to play with us.

NVC Trainer (again asking Boy 2): I hear you're frustrated, too, and I would still like to hear from you in your words what do you hear him saying?

Boy 2: That they don't want to be disturbed while they're playing.

NVC Trainer: That's what I hear as well. And now, I'd like to know how that is for you?

Boy 2: We want to play. Just because they're bigger than us, they never give us the field.

NVC Trainer (turning to Boy 1): So, what do you hear him say?

Boy 1: Yeah, they want to play, too, but it's not their time.

NVC Trainer: Hold on. Can you just hear him right now?

Boy 1: Yeah, he wants to play, too.

NVC Trainer: So what I'm hearing is that you both want to play. And you'd both like some say in where and how you can use the field.

Boy 2: But it's not fair. Just because they're bigger, they always get their way.

NVC Trainer (hearing his needs): So you would like respect? And you'd like fairness?

Boy 2: Yeah.

NVC Trainer: I'm guessing you might like to have equal time to play on the field? Would this meet your needs for fairness and for respect?

Boy 2: Yeah.

NVC Trainer (turning to Boy 1): I guess you'd like fairness as well?

Boy 1: Yeah.

NVC Trainer: I'm wondering if you're ready to consider some ways this could happen, or do either of you need more understanding first?

Boy 2: I think he'll just take the field anyway.

Boy 1: How do I know he won't keep butting in?

NVC Trainer: So it sounds to me like you both have a need to trust that the other person will keep whatever agreement you make about dividing up the field?

Boys 1 & 2: Yeah.

NVC Trainer: It seems important, then, that whatever agreement you come up with is one that you both feel comfortable with, and can genuinely say you will try out for a period of time, to see how it works. Would you agree?

Boys 1 & 2 (nodding their heads): Yeah.

NVC Trainer: My guess is that you both have some ideas for how this could get worked out. Would you like to talk by yourselves and then let me or one of your teachers know what ideas you come up with? Or do you want an adult to be with you while you discuss this?

Both boys said they wanted to talk together on their own. After a short while, they came up with a plan to

divide the field on some days and take turns using the whole field on other days. They said they would be willing to try this for two weeks and then meet to discuss how it's working.

While the boys were working this out, the NVC trainer turned to the group of teachers who had been watching the mediation.

NVC Trainer: So I'm curious what you observed in this interaction?

Teacher 1: I'm amazed that they worked it out so quickly.

NVC Trainer: So you're amazed, and, I'm guessing, pleased, to see how these students in conflict came to mutual understanding so quickly?

Teacher 1: Yes. And I'm thinking about how I would have handled it and how it probably would have turned out.

NVC Trainer: How is that?

Teacher 1: I probably would have scolded the older boy and told him he couldn't play on the field for a week, or something like that. I'd have punished him in some way. And he would not be talking with the younger boy.

Teacher 2: I was thinking the same thing. Only I probably would have punished the younger boy for breaking into their game. I might have told his whole group to stay off the field for some period of time and think about it until they learn how to get along. But it never works. It just takes the heat off for a while.

NVC Trainer: Hearing this, I imagine you will be interested to see how they are able to continue working things out for themselves?

Teacher 1: Yes. And I'm interested, too, in how I can learn to help them work things out for themselves, like you just did.



NVC in Education

Fun For Everyone

A teacher was teaching Nonviolent Communication to a group of 15 children, ages 5-8, in an After School Program. The group met in the school gym every day after school. For the first twenty minutes they ate a snack and talked and played with each other. Then the teacher introduced an activity or game that she hoped would provide a fun way to learn NVC skills.

One day they were playing a cooperative game where each person puts a beanbag on their head, and while music plays, they walk or run around the gym trying to keep the beanbag on their head. If the beanbag falls off, they have to freeze. They can't pick up their own beanbag, but must wait for someone else to pick it up and put it on their head, at which time they can move again. After playing this way for a time, two boys started knocking bean bags off of other kids' heads and pretty soon, all of the kids were racing around knocking beanbags off of each other's heads.

The teacher was very frustrated and anxious. She wanted order and wanted to make sure that everyone was safe. She shouted, "I want everyone to sit down on the floor in a circle right now!"

About half of the kids ran to the circle painted on the floor and sat down, while the others kept running around, gathering speed, as they started throwing bean bags at each other.

"Stop right now!" she shouted, even louder than before. "I want you to come sit down right now."

While the students made their way to the circle, a 7-year-old boy named Sean walked up to the teacher and the following dialogue ensued:

Sean: Ms. Mary, you're feeling angry, aren't you?

Teacher (surprised and grateful to be heard): Wow. Yes, Sean, I am feeling pretty frustrated right now. I feel heart-warmed that you noticed. I'm curious. How did you know what I was feeling?

Sean: I could tell by the way you were snatching the bean-bags off the floor.

Teacher (laughing): So you could see pretty clearly that I was upset?

Sean: Yeah.

Teacher: Well, it sure helps me to have you see that. I'm feeling more relaxed already.

The teacher then asked everyone to please be quiet.

Teacher (addressing all the students now seated on the circle): A few minutes ago when I yelled at you to stop and come sit down, I was feeling pretty frustrated. I want us to play and learn together. I want it to be fun and what was happening wasn't fun for me, mostly because I was worried someone would get hurt. Would someone tell me what you're hearing me say so far?

Student 1: You said you thought we'd hurt each other.

Student 2: And you said you were frustrated.

Teacher: Thank you for hearing that. It feels so good to be heard. I'm grateful too, that Sean came up to me and asked if I was angry. I was pretty upset for a few minutes. I'm feeling more relaxed now, but I'd still like to see how we can have more fun together in a way that I'm not worried about safety. I'd like to hear from you how you experienced that game.

Student 3: I thought it was fun. I wanted to play longer.

Student 4: Yeah, nobody was getting hurt.

Student 5: It hurt me when you hit my head.

Student 4: No it didn't.

Teacher: So it sounds like some people were having fun and some were not having fun. Is that accurate?

They nod their heads.

Teacher: I'd like to find a way to play where everyone is having fun and everyone is safe. Does anyone have an idea about how this could happen?

The teacher and students spent the rest of the time discussing ways that everyone could have fun. As so often happens, this real life exercise in finding a way that was fun for everyone turned out to provide more valuable learning for the group than the games the teacher had planned for that day. They ended the session by deciding to try three different versions of the game the next time they met to see which would best meet all of their needs.



NVC in Education

The Test

A High School teacher tells the following story.

My class is one of several “self contained” classrooms in the district. It is for the kids who do not fit into the regular High School program, mostly because of chronic aggressive behaviors or because they’re so depressed they don’t function very well. The class is a bit of a pressure cooker, with tempers often flaring at a moment’s notice.

Before taking my first NVC class, I relied exclusively on a variety of behavior modification techniques to maintain order. This meant that I spent a good deal of my time bribing the kids with rewards and threatening them with punishments. While these techniques, particularly threatening punishment, often worked to get order in the moment, I had seen for a long time how they add to the seething resentments, anger, and low self-esteem that are so characteristic of these kids. Unfortunately, I didn’t have any other tools to manage the classroom—until I discovered NVC.

When I first heard the NVC trainer say that all people are ever saying is “please” or “thank you,” I laughed out loud. It was an impossible stretch of the imagination to hear the things my students say as only “please” or “thank you.” But I guess I was desperate enough to try to make that stretch, because I very soon found myself hearing my students in a different way—actually hearing “please listen,” or “please help” in their demands and angry outbursts. Hearing in this new way, and learning to express my own feelings and needs to my students has changed the tone of my classroom from one of constant tension to more openness and trust.

One of the first times I experienced this shift was when we were preparing for one of the semi-annual state mandated standardized tests. Most of my students score below grade level on these tests and hate taking them. In the past, I had the attitude, “This is something we just need to get through and complaining about it won’t help.” This time, like the other times, I felt the tension in the air, observed the tightness in their bodies, and an increased amount of irritability with each other. What was different was that I was able to sense more clearly what was going on beneath their actions. With my newfound NVC skills I was able to guess about what they were feeling and what needs of theirs were not getting met.

Silently I empathized with their unexpressed feelings and needs: “I imagine you are scared and want to protect yourself from the pain of failing again” . . . “I guess you are hurt and want to be acknowledged for the fullness of you rather than just being seen as a ‘bad student’” . . . “I hear you are angry and guess it’s because you want to protect your autonomy—to have choice about how you spend your time” . . . In addition, I was pretty sure that many of my students frequently felt hopeless about getting their needs met at school, or anywhere else for that matter. Having to endure standardized tests seemed to bring all of these painful feelings and unmet needs to the surface.

Understanding them in this way really opened my heart and caused me to pause when, in the midst of telling the class what our testing schedule would be for the week, one of the students suddenly shouted, followed by several others.

Student 1: Why do I have to take this stupid test?

Student 2: Yeah, give us one good reason.

Student 3: It's to show who's smart and who's stupid.

Student 4: Yeah, well, the ones who made up this test are the stupid ones.

Teacher (listening to their feelings and needs): Are you feeling irritated because you'd like clarity about how you would benefit from taking the test?

Student 1: Yeah, why do we have to take them? We know what the results are going to be. It's a stupid waste of time.

Teacher (reflecting his needs): I guess you'd like to know the reasons behind people asking you to do things?

Student 5: Not "ask" us to do. Make us do.

Teacher (hearing more feelings and needs): So you're angry, too, because you'd like to choose what you do here, and not be forced to do things.

Student 5: Yeah, here and everywhere else. What do we get to choose? We don't even get to wear the clothes we want to school.

Teacher (in a tone of voice that expresses inquiry): You're fed up with all the things that adults decide for you? You'd like more choice?

Student 5: It's stupid to even talk about it. There's nothing we can do.

Teacher (continuing to guess feelings and needs): It sounds like you're feeling pretty discouraged about even getting heard by adults?

Student 5: Yeah. Why waste my breath?

Teacher: So you feel hopeless and, I'm guessing, real sad when your need for understanding isn't being met?

Student 5: (Silently, he lowers his head, his eyes filling with tears.)

Everyone was quiet for a few minutes. There was a noticeable shift in the energy of the class, from tense and angry to soft and sad. I'm sure it was because I was able to just listen to them—with no resistance, argument, or pat answer. Then the first student who had spoken, asked his question again.

Student 1: So why do we have to take these tests? Do you know?

Teacher: The truth is, I don't really know why you have to take them. I've been told some reasons for the test, but I'm not as clear about them as I'd like to be, so I'd rather not talk more about it right now. I promise you that I will look into the reasons for these tests and get back to you. I want you to know why it is you are being asked to do things. I really want to be clear why I am asking you to do things. I also feel sad because autonomy is very precious to me and I want you to have more choice in your lives. I'd like to do something about that. So I appreciate very much that you opened up this discussion today and shared your needs and the feelings connected with them.

Following this exchange, I said to my students, "Obviously, there are a lot of painful feelings associated

with taking these tests. There's also a lack of clarity about their purpose. I want to continue to address your needs and the confusion and other feelings connected to them. Is anyone doubting my desire to do this?"

When no one spoke up, I continued: "In the meantime, to make things easiest for all of us right now, I'd like to begin and complete this round of testing that has already been scheduled. Is there anyone who would not be willing to go along with me on this?" I remember I felt so astonished and grateful to see that no one was unwilling to take the dreaded tests that day.

Now, of course, I see that my students were always telling me how they feel. I was the one who acted differently that day, by taking the time to hear what they were saying, and by being willing to honestly express my feelings and needs to them.

I really got the power of NVC in education that day.



NVC in Education

“You’re Dead”

A counselor at a High School facilitates a weekly NVC practice group for interested students. One of the students in this group, Kim, came to the counselor’s office one day in obvious distress. The counselor invited her to sit down and asked her what was going on. Kim said that Tess, another student at school (not in the NVC group), had just walked by Kim in the hallway and, looking straight at her, said, “You’re dead.” Kim said that she had had other tense interactions with Tess, but this one really scared her.

Counselor: Wow, Kim . . . I see you’re shaking . . .

Kim: (nodding her head and taking some deep breaths to calm down) Yeah . . . I’m scared. What if she really means it?

Counselor: (listening empathically to what Kim’s feeling and wanting) You’re wondering what was going on inside Tess to say that? And you want to know if she’s really thinking about hurting you?

Kim: She could. She’s got friends. And she sounded really mad.

Counselor: (trying to get more clarification about the situation) I’m curious about what she was reacting to—do you know?

Kim: She’s angry about something I said about her to some kids.

Counselor: Uh huh . . .

Kim: It's true I said it . . . but she says stuff about me, too. Lots of stuff! (*suddenly angry*) She has no right to threaten my life!

Counselor: (*hearing Kim's feeling beneath the anger*) It's really scary for you to hear that and think she might be serious?

Kim: Yeah! I don't want to get hurt!

Counselor: Yeah. . . (*now reflecting Kim's need*) you want to be safe.

Kim: Yeah. I just want to live my life, come to school, not have to watch my back all the time.

Counselor: Sounds like you'd like to feel safe enough so you can focus your attention on other things at school besides your safety . . . like schoolwork and friends and soccer . . . ?

Kim: Yeah . . . This is a total waste of time. I don't know how it got so out of control! I know I'm partly to blame because I do talk crap about her. I don't know why I do that. It's stupid.

Counselor: (*translating Kim's judgment into feelings and needs*) Sounds like you're feeling regret about your part in this and would like to do some things differently in the future?

Kim: Yeah. I really don't want to gossip about people. It just hurts everybody. Tess talks crap behind my back and I hate it.

Counselor: Sounds like you're seeing how painful it is for everyone when people talk about each other in

these ways?

Kim: (nodding her head) Yeah. I really want it to stop

Counselor: (noticing that Kim has relaxed now that she has received this much empathy, she expresses her own feelings and needs) Hearing you say that, I feel relieved and pretty excited, because I'm confident you can stop this conflict with Tess by choosing to do things differently—using your words to heal instead of to hurt. It begins, as you know, with a desire to connect. So I'm wondering if you're ready to try and connect with Tess today? Or do you need more understanding first?

Kim: (pausing a moment to check in with herself) I think I'm ready. I'm scared, though, to talk with her. I'd like you to be there.

Counselor: I'd like to be there. I'd like to hear you tell her your feelings and what you want just like you told me. And I'm betting she needs some empathy first before she can really hear you. Are you up for connecting with her feelings and needs in this matter?

Kim: I'd like to try.

The counselor arranges for Tess and Kim to meet in her office later that day. Kim arrives first and is seated when Tess comes to the door and looks in. Tess glares at Kim, then walks in and sits on a chair that faces Kim, her shoulders slumped forward, her arms crossed in front of her, and her eyes fixed on the floor.

Counselor: I'm glad you both could make it. I'm guessing you're both a bit scared to be here right now,

wondering how this is going to go? (*looking at Tess*) Tess, I'd like to first give you a little background. Earlier today Kim came to my office for some empathy, because she had a lot of feelings stirred up by what's going on between you. After getting the empathy she wanted, she said she wanted to talk with you. She asked me to be here to help you both hear each other the way you want to be heard. To get to the deeper feelings and needs you each have. The way I do this is by helping translate anything that might sound like blame or criticism into present feelings and needs. How does this sound so far?

Tess: (still looking down) Okay.

Counselor: Great. I'd like each of us to feel safe, so please—either one of you—speak up if at any time you're not comfortable with what's happening here. Okay? (*seeing them both nod their heads, she then turns to Kim*) So, Kim, will you start by telling Tess what you're feeling and what your needs are?

Tess: Okay. (*looking at Tess*) Tess . . . I'm feeling a little scared right now, but not as scared as I was today in the hall when you said "You're dead." I came to see Paula [the Counselor] because she helps me sort things out by listening to me. What I see now is I really want to stop the war between us.

Counselor: (reminding Kim to make a present request after saying this much, to see how Tess is receiving her message) So, Kim, what would you like back from Tess right now in relation to what you just said?

Kim: I guess I'd like to know how you feel when you hear me say this.

Tess: (looking up for the first time, eyes fixed on Kim) What you said about me was a lie and now everyone believes it.

[Note: Tess's response did not answer Kim's question about how she felt. Instead, Tess expressed her pain, making clear that what she needs right now is empathy.]

Kim: (shifting from expressing to listening) Sounds like you're angry about what I said. You want people to know the truth and not believe something bad about you that's not true.

Tess: Yeah. People are angry at me now, including my boyfriend, because of what you said.

Kim: It's awful when people close to you are mad at you. And frustrating when it's about something that's not true?

Tess: Yeah. Why did you say that, anyway?

Kim: (taking a couple of deep breaths to connect with herself) I wasn't sure if it was true or not, what I said about you. And why I said it? I think I was just hurting bad because of things you said and the way we were with each other. When I said it, I just wanted to hurt you back. . . You know what I mean?

Tess: Yeah. I know how it feels to hurt and want to hurt back. It feels better. . . for a while.

Kim: Yeah, I feel real sad about all the hurt for both of us. I wish I hadn't said what I did . . . and other stuff

I've said, too. I'd like to stop the fighting and see if we can get along.

Tess: So what about the lies people believe about me?

Kim: Would you like to talk about what we can do to clear them up?

Tess: Yeah. You think we can really do that?

Kim: *(smiling now, with tears in her eyes)* Yes. I really do.

This dialogue demonstrates how a very “charged”, and possibly dangerous, situation can be defused in a relatively few exchanges of empathy and honesty. The level of trust and connection that was created in this conversation between Kim and Tess is common in NVC dialogues, though the process may take longer and involve more exchanges in some situations. As can be seen here, the connection can be made even when only one of the participants in the dialogue is familiar with NVC.