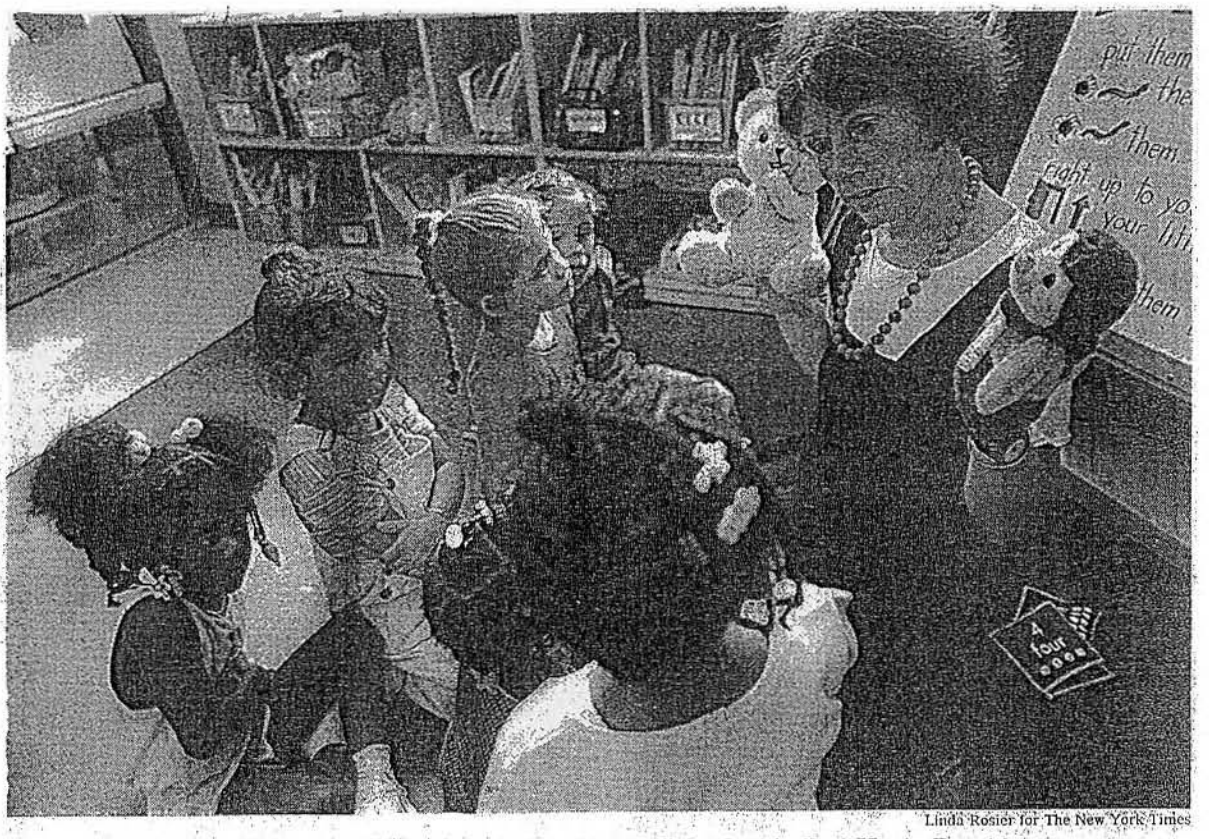
The New York Times

Study Finds Programs in Schools Can Curb Violence Among Young

By RANDY BANNER

School-based programs can help reduce violence at an early age, according to a study being released today by Columbia University.

A two-year evaluation of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, a violence-prevention program in New York City public schools, found that students in the program tended to be less hostile, were less likely to resort to aggression and more likely to choose verbal rather than physical strategies to resolve conflicts.



Linda Rosier for The New York Times

Lorrie Mann gives a lesson in conflict resolution at Public School 15 in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

The study, by the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia's Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, tracked 5,000 students in grades two through five from 15 New York City elementary schools that took part in the program in 1994 and 1995. The center surveyed teachers and students, who ranked incidents of aggressive behavior. Students who took the most classes in conflict resolution, on average 25 over the school year, had no increase in incidents, while others, on a scale of 1 to 5, had an increase of almost 2. Aggression and violent behavior naturally increase as children mature, said J. Lawrence Aber, principal investigator of the study and director of the Center for Children in Poverty.

The study also found that students taking 25 lessons in conflict resolution improved academically faster than those with less exposure to the program.

The program, initiated in 1985, teaches students techniques to control potentially violent situations through negotiation and reasoning. It includes classroom instruction, a student peer mediation program, teacher training and a series of workshops for parents. The program is used in 60 primary and secondary schools in New York City and taught to 9,000 students in kindergarten through the 12th grade. For the youngest students, puppets and other playthings are used to illustrate how conflicts can be resolved by talking rather than hitting.

Violence prevention initiatives have become common throughout the country. Boston public schools have a program called Voices of Love and Freedom, and there are many local initiatives in New York City itself. The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, however, is the only systemwide initiative financed by New York City's Board of Education, which administers the program with the nonprofit group Educators for Social Responsibility.

The study of New York's program was financed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and private foundations.

Ellen Icolari, the program's director for the Board of Education, said the report validated what was already a widely held view by those involved with it. "It's something we've known all along from working in the schools but never had hard data to back up," she said.

Dr. Aber said the study was conducted at the elementary level to determine if the program succeeded in early child hood -- which is deemed to be a critical time in the formatio of attitudes and behaviors -- and then to follow the student into junior high and high school in subsequent studies.

A report examining the program from 1995-1996 will be issued next year.