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Implementation of Self-regulation and Conflict Resolution Strategies through Conscious Discipline in an Early Childhood Classroom

An Action Research Report
By Alyssa D'Apolito

Implementation of Self-regulation and Conflict Resolution Strategies through Conscious
Discipline in an Early Childhood Classroom

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing Conscious Discipline® methods would improve self-regulation and conflict resolution strategies. The action research took place over six weeks in a Montessori classroom with 30 students ranging from 3-6 years old; however, the participants were eight specific four or five year old male students. Four data collection tools were used throughout the intervention; a pre and post intervention survey, a weekly behavioral observation, a student reflection, and an end-of-day self-reflection form. After analyzing the data, evidence showed improved behaviors. By implementing Conscious Discipline®, students were able to improve their self-regulation and peer interaction skills. Potential future action research investigation relating to this study may include what effects Conscious Discipline® would have on females or how Conscious Discipline® helps older participants with more mature social issues such as bullying, fighting, labeling, and peer pressure.

Keywords: Conscious Discipline®, Montessori, self-regulation

Montessori early childhood classrooms are beautiful environments, which foster learning, collaborating, experimenting, and developing independence. The philosophy of following each child's individual developmental needs and interests is pursued and children grow at a pace in which they are capable of. Maria Montessori describes this Children's House as "not simply a place where the children are kept, not just an asylum, but a true school for their education, and its methods are inspired by rational principles of scientific pedagogy" (Montessori, 1964, pg. 62).

Despite the physical classroom set up, the goals of individualism, and the readiness of the teacher, a child must be socially and emotionally prepared to function in a classroom with others. In order to foster the social and emotional development of young children, one must create opportunities for learning and practicing of these skills. Just as children need to be taught and given opportunities to practice tying their shoes, doing addition, and reading, they need these same opportunities for establishing self-regulation and problem solving peer conflicts.

Maria Montessori stresses the importance of clear, consistent observation in a classroom. It is through observation that a teacher can better prepare the environment, understand the readiness and needs of each student, and resolve the needs of the class as a whole. "The teacher must derive not only the capacity, but the desire to observe natural phenomena. The teacher must understand and feel her position of observer; the activity must lie in the phenomenon" (Montessori, 1964, pg. 87).

When determining social and emotional development goals can be made, I spent days simply observing my environment. I documented how many positive and negative situations arose, how many teacher interventions were needed for social interactions,

what students appeared to need the most support, and what time of day certain situations occurred. It was through these observations that I concluded my four and five year old male students would benefit from introducing self-regulation and peer conflict strategies. In recognizing the need for intervention and remediation, I chose a specific approach for promoting healthy conflict resolution strategies based on the Conscious Discipline® program.

My goal was to determine if implementing developmentally appropriate self-regulation and conflict resolution strategies through Conscious Discipline® would assist with the social and emotional development of these skills in four year old male students in an early childhood Montessori classroom. All students were included in the implementation of Conscious Discipline® methods and peace education practices. However, only the data from eight 4-5 year old male students were collected and used within the study.

By using strategies from the Conscious Discipline® program, I hypothesized students would gain the skills necessary for self-regulation and solving peer conflict independently. “Peer conflict, defined as mutual opposition between two or more people, is thought to be one of the factors responsible for the formation of cognitive structures and emotions” (Shantz and Hartup, 1992).

Review of Literature

Conscious Discipline® was developed from the latest brain research and current child development information. In a 2001-2002 research study, using the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC), teachers in a Florida elementary school (K-6th) identified 12 students as the most difficult and assessed them. With the

implementation of Conscious Discipline®, 75% of the students moved from an “atypical” to a “normal” range based on the pre- and post- assessment, achieving significant improvement in the following areas: hyperactivity, aggressiveness and impulsivity. (Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2005).

Jeffrey Rain (2013) conducted a study assessing the effectiveness of Conscious Discipline®. Scores from twelve scales were used to compare Conscious Discipline® with non-Conscious Discipline® classrooms drawn from 66 teachers, 1386 students and 868 parents at 24 sites in three states over an 8-month period. Results were drawn from teachers, parents of the children and trained classroom observers. Research shows that Conscious Discipline® “improves the social and emotional skills of students and teachers, increases student academic readiness and academic achievement, improves the quality of student-teacher interactions, improves school climate, decreases aggression in preschool children, and decreases impulsivity and hyperactivity in difficult students” (Conscious Discipline®, 2013).

Maria Montessori wrote “it is upon peace that the very life of the nation depend, perhaps even the progress or decay of our entire civilization” (1986, p. 3) The Montessori Method incorporates peace education within its curriculum and is considered an imperative piece of her philosophy. Montessori was ahead of her time, believing that the problem of world peace can never be satisfactory solved until we start with the child (Standing, 1984, p. 157). This same belief continues today with supports such as the Association for Childhood Education International recognizing an increasing need for high-quality peace education for children (2003).

Rhonda Jeffries researched a specific urban school's attempt at peace education. Fritsche Middle School was overwhelmed with the issues of most urban schools including high rates of suspension, fighting, and academic failure. Upon the arrival of a new principal, it was quickly noted that this school was in serious need of peace education. The methodologies used were peer mediation and positive conflict resolution methods. The program resulted in 20% decreased suspension rates and saw better communication and relationships between peers and teachers. After two years of implementation, students failing courses had decreased by 5.6%, parent-student conference attendance increased an average of 53%, and GPAs increased an average of 14.7% (Jeffries, 2000, p. 19).

Evidence proves there may be gender-related differences in social/emotional development. Miller, Danaher and Forbes (1986), for example, discovered that, in children, boys tended to have more disputes than their female counterparts. Similar findings were presented in Black's (2000) study suggesting adolescent boys argue more than girls do. One study documented children's gender stereotypes through drawings of emotional faces and concluded that boys draw angrier faces than girls (Brechet, 2012). On the contrary, two child development researchers, Jambunathan & Hurlbut (2000), documented the gender comparisons in perception of self-competence among four-year old children and the results determined there were no significant differences between males and females. The researchers concluded this may be due to a less gender stereotyped preschool environment.

In reviewing the literature, evidence concludes there is a need for peace education, including self-regulation and conflict resolution strategies, in early childhood classrooms. According to Helmsen, Koglin, & Petermann (2012),

Early childhood is a period of tremendous growth in cognitive, social, and emotional development, making it an important period for research. For example, preschoolers acquire a growing repertoire of emotion regulation strategies and they have an increasing understanding of mental constructs such as beliefs, desires, and intentions. (p. 91)

Throughout early childhood environments, challenging behaviors are expected to occur and when given the appropriate strategies, students can learn to independently cope with and resolve these behaviors. According to Schwebel (2001), “an important starting point for social scientists who want to promote a culture of peace is knowledge about when and how children develop concepts of war and peace” (p. 2). The National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC) also supports the discussion of peace and war, stating “that in addition to discussing war with young children, adults provide them with examples of peaceful resolution of conflicts” (2003).

The purpose of this research is to determine if teaching self-regulation and conflict resolution strategies will effectively assist four-five year old male students with their self-regulation and ability to resolve peer conflict using Conscious Discipline methods. Piaget’s work (1932) suggests that children construct more mature social skills when given the opportunity to actively participate in the resolution process.

Methodology

My main intervention method was implementing the tools from the Conscious Discipline® program. The Conscious Discipline® strategies included student conferences after conflict situations where self-awareness was facilitated and discussed, role-playing, and the implementation of lessons on conflict resolution strategies. Doppler, Harkins, &

McPhee (2002) suggest “providing situations and teachable moments for children to try out different strategies may ultimately lead to more highly developed pro-social behavior in the classroom and eventually, in society at large” (p. 24). In determining when conflict resolution strategies should be implemented, I concluded that the most appropriate times were during moments of peace and collaboration between peers. During situations of conflict and upset, the students were less willing to participate and interact with one another. Ramani (2012) suggests that “integrating features of play into structured, experimental settings should increase the benefits of joint peer interactions and task performance” (p. 185).

Each day for twenty minutes, a “peace circle” was conducted. During this time, Conscious Discipline methods were taught through the use of Conscious Discipline’s “Shubert” books, role modeling, role playing, and practicing self-regulation and conflict resolution with Conscious Discipline tools. If the students were engaged in conflict, they were redirected to the peace shelf where these materials would be readily available to use at any time of day. These tools included a “Time Machine mat,” a “STAR wand,” a “Calming Cube,” and a “Safe Space.”

The Time Machine mat is a long, rectangular mat used between two children. Each child stood at each end of the mat, facing each other. The mat included printed words and pictures that assisted the students in conflict resolution. As each child took a step closer to the middle of the mat, they partook in a Conscious Discipline calming technique (taking a deep breath, wishing the other child well). Once they arrive at the middle of the mat facing each other, they communicate about their conflict. This tool was used to assist the students in practicing self-calming techniques before they confronted

their friend. The STAR Wand was used to remind students to “be a STAR” and stop, take a deep breath, and relax. The student having a difficult time self-calming would hold the wand, or another student would bring the wand over to the child and breathe for that upset child. The Calming Cube is a 6-sided cube with different pictures that resemble different breathing techniques. During times of upset, the child would roll the calming cube and demonstrate the specific breathing technique. The last tool, Safe Space, is an area in the classroom where students would go to self-calm and relax. The Safe Space was restricted to only one child at a time, which allowed the child to independently reflect and self-soothe as needed. This Safe Space included a comfortable “bed” (large pillow-top surface for lying on), a pillow, a blanket, a basket of self-calming materials, and each child’s family picture. The self-calming materials included a handheld squeeze ball for squeezing tightly, lavender lotion to stimulate massage and relaxation through smell, a stuffed animal for comfort, a mirror for visual reflection, and handheld windmill for deep breathing.

The four data collection sources used were daily observations, end-of-day self evaluation done by students, conflict reflection done by a student after an upset had occurred, and a pre and post social development test completed by myself. The first data source, a weekly observation record, documented specific behaviors demonstrated by each participant. This data was collected daily and analyzed at the end of each week. Students were in the classroom between 8:40am-2:45pm, Monday-Friday and it was during these hours that observation took place. These weekly observation records allowed me to document what positive behaviors, if any, were demonstrated throughout the process. Furthermore, data could be analyzed to determine any patterns between children

and/or times of day and whether it changed after the interventions. These were located on the teacher desk for easy access during the day and stored in a locked cabinet after school hours. Each record included the date, time of day, location, whether the behavior was individual or peer related, a list of behaviors to observe, and whether the student was able to reflect (See Appendix A).

The second data source, a student self-reflection interview, was conducted after each peer conflict or situation involving self-regulation strategies. The amount of data collected through the student reflection forms differed for each child, depending on the number of times a child displayed certain behaviors. This data allowed me to understand the student's perspective of a situation and document what strategies, if any, were used to solve peer conflict or assist with self-regulation (See Appendix B).

The third data source was an end-of-day student evaluation where students were asked how they felt their day went and what helpful things were done throughout their day. These self-evaluations were used to determine if the child noticed a change in his own behavior and were completed at the end of each day before the students went home. The evaluation was a one on one conversation between the child and teacher and is based solely on the opinion of the student without any teacher influence or discussion (See Appendix C).

The last data source was a social/emotional development survey completed by the teacher. This was collected as pre- and post-data and provided information as to what behaviors were typically occurring on a daily basis before and after intervention took place. This test included a list of behaviors and a rating scale of "never, seldom, and often", used to determine the frequency of each behavior. (See Appendix D)

Analysis of Data

Before intervention began, a pre-intervention survey was completed to determine the social/emotional behaviors of each participant. All 8 participants were evaluated based on whether they followed general guidelines, worked without disrupting others, used classroom materials appropriately, used words to express self, used a calm tone of voice during peer conflict, used Conscious Discipline® strategies, and used safe hands with other students. The frequency of each behavior was determined using a rating scale consisting of “often, seldom, or never.” The pre-intervention data collected over five days formed the baseline data and it was compared to final post-intervention data collected over 25 days at the end of the research period.

Overall, the pre- and post-intervention survey determined that after the six weeks of implementing Conscious Discipline® methods, there was improvement in all areas of the survey (See Figure 1A and 1B).

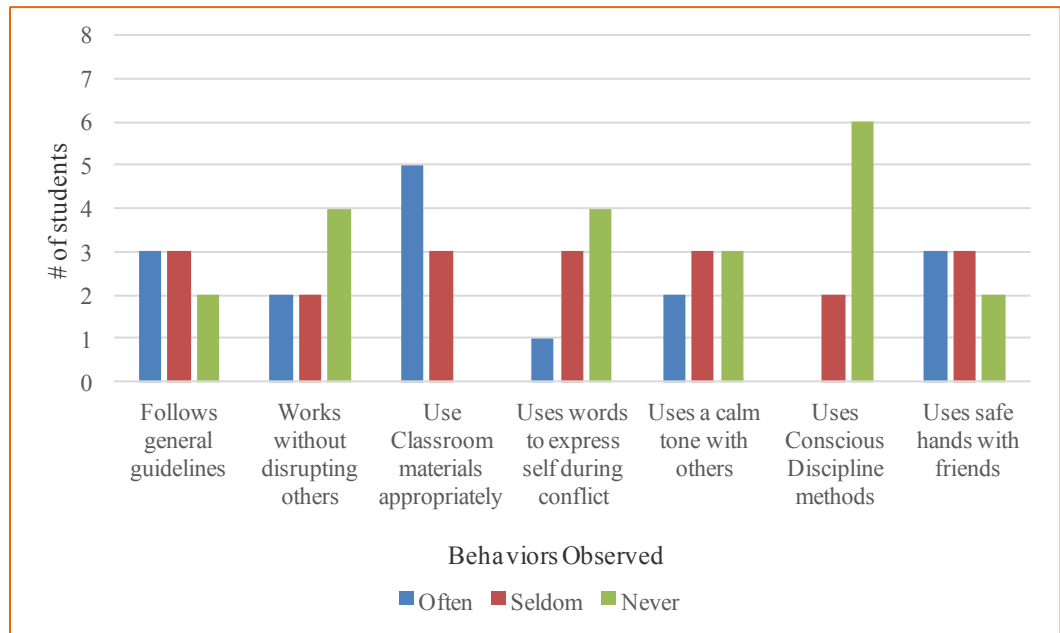


Figure 1A. Pre-Intervention Social/Emotional Survey. This figure illustrates the number of students whom demonstrated each particular behavior before the intervention began.

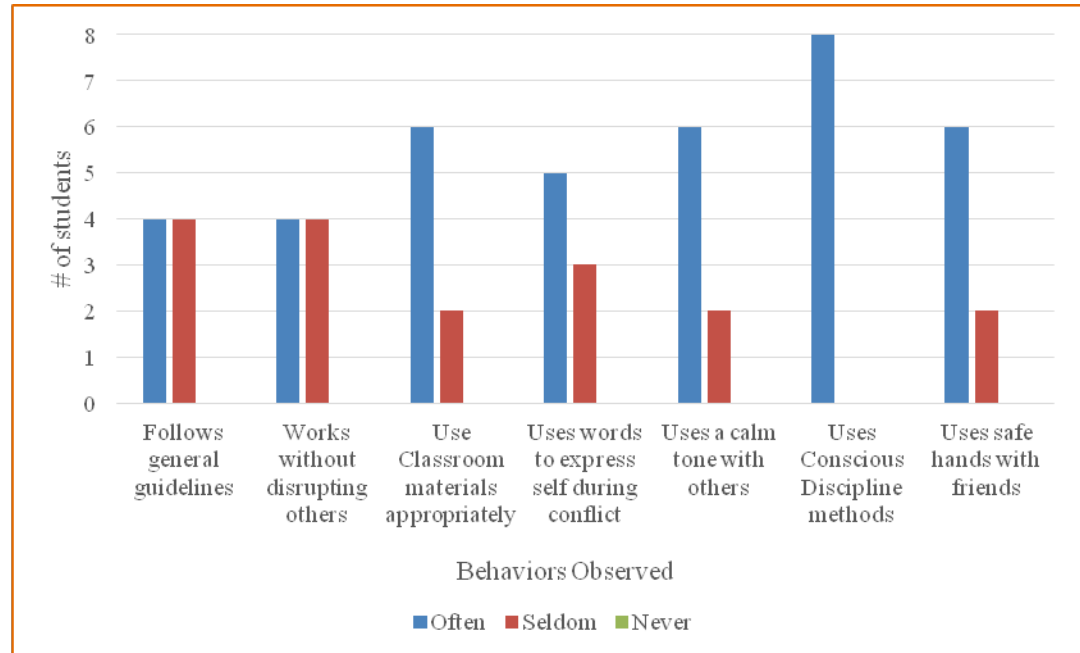


Figure 1B. Post-Intervention Social/Emotional Survey. This figure illustrates the number of students whom demonstrated each particular behavior after the intervention concluded.

These graphs show the frequency of pre-and post-intervention behaviors. Overall, there was an increase in all positive behaviors. The greatest change in behaviors was the use of Conscious Discipline methods. Pre-intervention had zero students using these methods whereas post-intervention results concluded all students used Conscious Discipline often. Using words to express self during peer conflicts improved from 1 out of 8 students pre-intervention to 5 out of 8 post-intervention, showing another remarkable increase. Using a calm tone also showed large improvements with 2 out of 8 doing so “often” in pre-intervention and 6 out of 8 doing so post-intervention.

A weekly observation was completed by the teacher where all 8 participants were observed to determine the frequency with which the following behaviors occurred; followed general guidelines, worked without disrupting others, used classroom materials appropriately, used words to express self, used a calm tone of voice during peer conflict, used Conscious Discipline® strategies, used safe hands with other students, and asks a

teacher for help. The frequency of each behavior was documented and tallied at the end of each week (See Figure 2). Week one data collected over five days formed the baseline data and it was compared to final data collected over 25 days at the end of the research period. Over the six weeks, students' abilities to follow general classroom guidelines increased in all areas.

The main improvements for self-regulation included following general classroom guidelines and working without disrupting others. The leading improvements for solving peer conflicts included using words to express oneself and using a calm tone with other peers. The participants appeared to have more patience with their conflicting peer during times of upset and both parties involved would partake in using Conscious Discipline methods to solve any issues.

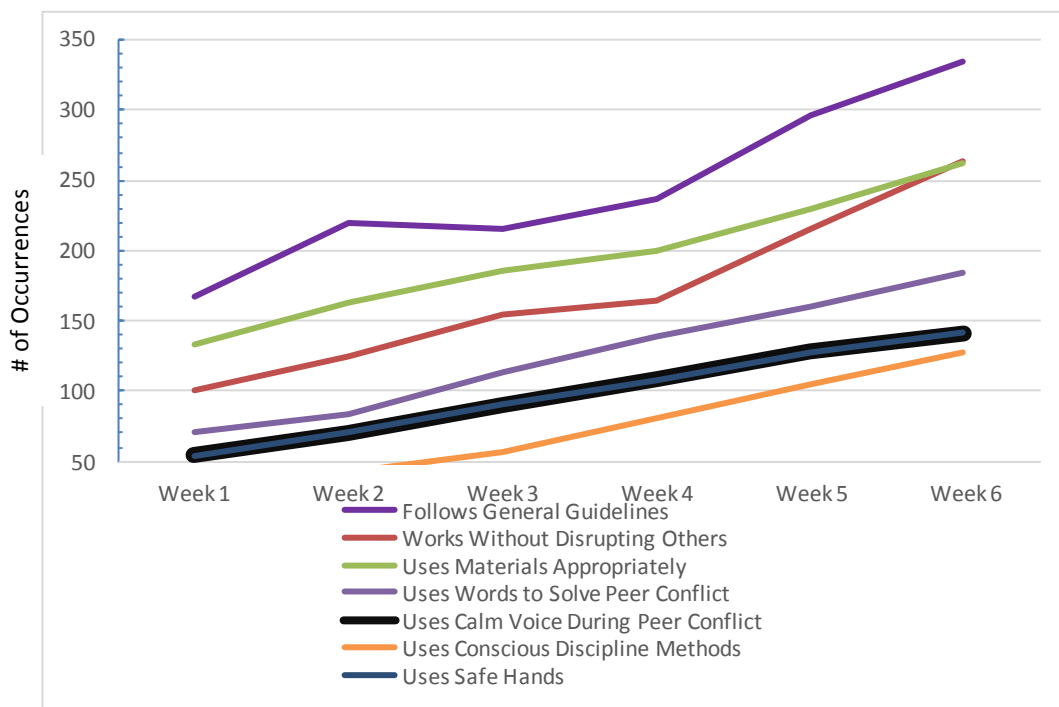


Figure 2. Weekly Behavioral Observation. This figure illustrates the frequency in which each behavior was demonstrated by the whole group.

The third data source used was a self-reflection interview completed by the student with the teacher after each peer conflict and/or difficulty with self-regulation. This evaluation asked the student a series of questions relating to the specific incident observed. These questions included whether the student remembered what upset him, what bodily actions occurred during the upset, whether the behavior was helpful or hurtful, what action he chose to complete to calm his body, how they felt after the action was completed, and what should be done next time.

Pre-intervention data was collected to form a baseline of the number of incidents, which would then be compared to week six's results. During week one 168 incidents of peer conflicts and/or self-regulation difficulties were documented. During the self reflection interviews, when participants were asked if they remember what initially upset him, 158 situations were recalled and 10 could not be. Within these 169 incidents, 22 resulted in crying, 49 incidences of hitting, 58 included yelling, and 27 resulted in telling a teacher. Twelve "other responses" were documented, including ignoring the peer, asking a friend to help solve the conflict, or verbally disputing back and forth until the conflict was solved or someone walked away. Participants were asked if their initial behavior was "helpful or hurtful". Out of 168 responses, 127 responded with "hurtful", 27 "helpful", and 14 couldn't give a response (stating "I don't know" or shrugging shoulders).

By the end of week six, the number of incidents decreased to 87 in that week. When participants were asked if they remember what initially upset them, all 87 situations were remembered. Within these 87 incidences, 9 resulted in crying, 6 altercations included hitting, 16 included yelling, 19 resulted in telling a teacher, and 37

“other” responses were documented, including , asking a friend to help solve the conflict, or verbally disputing back and forth until the conflict was solved or someone walked away. Many of these other responses included appropriate calming strategies and the use of Conscious Discipline methods. Participants were asked if their initial behavior was “helpful or hurtful”. Out of 87 responses, 57 responded with “hurtful” and 30“helpful”.

After the six-week intervention, there was a large decrease in the number of peer conflicts and difficulties with self-regulation and the ability to recall what initially started the upset, improved. The bodily actions to these upsets also became less physical each week, while the Conscious Discipline® methods used for calming increased (See Figure 3).

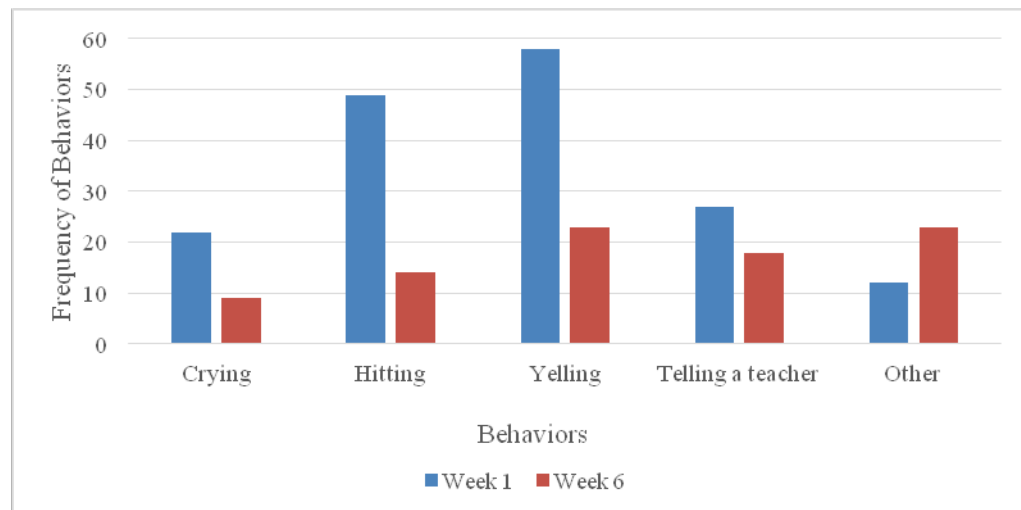


Figure 3. Behavior responses from week 1 to week 6. This figure illustrates frequency of negative behaviors demonstrated pre-intervention and post intervention.

In determining the frequency of which Conscious Discipline® methods were exhibited, week one formed the baseline data and was compared to week six results. Data concluded that by the end of the six-week intervention, teacher support had decreased while all other Conscious Discipline® methods increased in use based on teacher

observations. After these calming methods were used, participants said they felt improvements in their emotional state at that time (See figure 4).

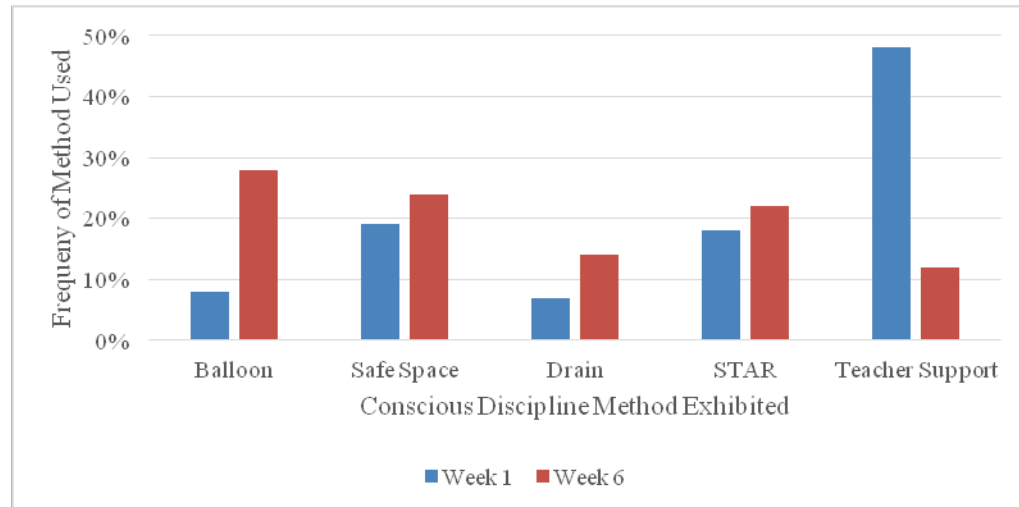


Figure 4. Conscious Discipline methods used. This figure illustrates the frequency of specific Conscious Discipline methods used from pre-intervention and post intervention.

This data lead to the conclusions that over the six-week intervention period, students' ability to use self-regulation strategies during peer conflicts and times of upset steadily increased. Students were able to remember the initial cause of upset more, the physical reactions lessened, Conscious Discipline® self-calming methods increased, and students were able to reflect how calming methods made them feel, as well all strategize what to do next time during a similar situation. Reflections include responses such as “Be a STAR”, “relax in Safe Space”, “go get a teacher for help”, and “take deep breaths.”

The last data tool used was the end of day student reflection form. This form was a brief look at the overall day, completed by the student. The students were asked to rate their day either “great,” “just okay,” or “challenging.” They were also asked to give the reason as to why they rated their day as such. The reflection form also listed helpful classroom behaviors that the student would check off if they felt they engaged in the behavior. Over the six-week intervention, the number of great days steadily increased

while the number of challenging days decreased. The “okay” days appeared to fluctuate throughout each week, showing an overall, but not consistent decline (See Figure 5).

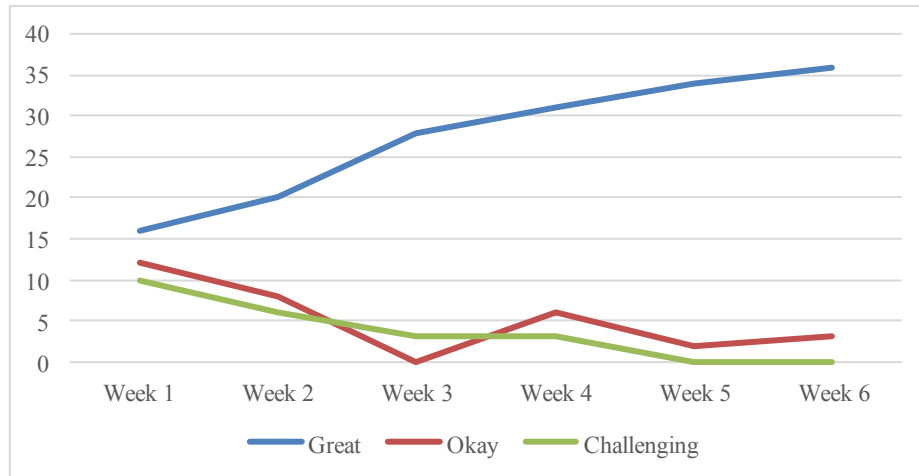


Figure 5. End of day self-reflection. This figure illustrates the frequency of each response given by the students each week.

Conclusion

After analyzing the four data tools over the six-week intervention, all four tools showed evidence of improved behaviors due to the use of Conscious Discipline® methods. By implementing Conscious Discipline® throughout the day, students were able to improve their self-regulation and peer interaction skills such as using words to express one’s self, using a calm tone of voice during peer conflict, using safe hands with other students, remembering the cause of the initial upset, planning ahead for the next time a similar situation appeared, identifying emotions, and self-reflecting. By improving these self-regulation skills, students inadvertently showed improvements following general classroom behaviors including working without disrupting others and using classroom materials appropriately.

Limitations of Data

Because much of the data is based on behaviors observed, it is possible more behaviors occurred, but were not witnessed by the teacher. Also, the opinions and reflections of these 4 and 5-year-old students were collected, making the data unreliable as it is possible students would respond to what they thought would be the correct answer.

Action Plan

Based on the research and data collected, it is evident that students need to be taught the skills for appropriate self-regulation and solving peer conflicts, just as they need guidance in learning Mathematics or Language. These skills were taught through pre-planned activities such as group discussions, role playing, and practicing with the Conscious Discipline® materials. Impromptu moments, such as when peer conflict arose, were also used as teaching moments. Not only did the self-regulation and interactive behaviors improve over the six-week intervention, more common classroom behaviors developed such as raising hands to speak, choosing appropriate work, and handling materials correctly. The results of this research have guided my teaching practice to focus on the emotional development of a child before the academic readiness. Some of the participants had high academic abilities but were unable to display them due to their lack of emotional and social development. Once the students felt a sense of inner calm and order, many classroom behaviors improved. It is easy to get caught up in the importance of academic readiness and lose sight of what is happening on a deeper level. I did not realize how much time and energy were spent on the constant redirections of these students until I began documenting their daily social/emotional behaviors and peer

conflicts. The amount of time spent on redirections far exceeded the amount of time we spent providing purposeful lessons on Conscious Discipline® methods and how and when to use the materials. In future I plan to give more lessons on Conscious Discipline® tools, and thus hopefully decrease the amount of time spent redirecting.

The results of the study could impact student learning by showcasing the importance of facilitating the development of social and emotional regulation skills. At all age levels, students are able to develop more mature skills in these developmental areas, showing the importance of giving students the tools and opportunities to develop these skills. Once given direction and age-appropriate tools, students can independently seek answers to their conflicts. This independence could lead to boosts in confidence, leadership, and more positive peer interactions because they feel more competent in their skills.

Potential future action research investigation relating to this study may include what effects Conscious Discipline® would have on female participants. Another possible study may include using older participants to see how Conscious Discipline® helps students work through more mature social issues. The young participants in my study responded with crying, hitting, telling a teacher, etc. An older audience may deal with or exhibit more serious issues such as bullying, fighting, labeling, and peer pressure. This study was conducted on a small group consisting of eight participants; however, another possible investigation may be documenting a whole classroom including all students.

From my research I have concluded that it is imperative for teachers, administrators, school board members, and legislature to understand the value of teaching to the whole child in all developmental domains. The knowledge of mathematics and

reading can only go so far. Society needs citizens that are socially and emotionally developed with empathy, compassion, and respect for others. “The caring classroom offers an understanding, tolerant, and accepting environment that reflects the roots of empathy and knowledge of emotions encountered in facing potential violence and resolving conflicts” (Stomfay-Stitz & Wheeler, 2006). These social/emotional skills can be fostered from a very young age, as long as the importance of these skills are understood and strategies are provided in early childhood classrooms. Maria Montessori once said, “Averting war is the work of politicians; establishing peace is the work of education” (1964).

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Appendix B

Student Reflection Interview

Student Name _____

Classroom _____

Teacher Name _____

Date _____

Time _____

 Individual Behavior Peer Related Conflict

(Check one)

- 1) Do you remember what made you feel so _____ (upset, angry, sad)?

- 2) What did your body do when you felt _____?

- 3) Was that helpful or hurtful when you _____?

- 4) What did you do to help your body calm?

- 5) How do you feel now that your body is calm?

- 6) What can we do next time this situation happens and you feel _____?

Additional Comments:

Appendix C

Student Reflection at the End of the Day

Student Name _____

Date _____

I think today
went...



GREAT!!!



Just okay...



Challenging

Because

_____.

The wonderful
things I did
today were...



Played with friends



Used helpful hands



Used my helpful
words



Went to a teacher
for help



Helped a friend



Raised my hand



Completed my work



Tried my BEST

Appendix D

SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Name:

Date:

BEHAVIOR	Never	Seldom	Often	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows general classroom rules • Works without disrupting others • Uses classroom materials appropriately • Chooses appropriate lessons • Completes a lesson from beginning to end independently • Uses words to solve peer conflict • Uses a calm tone of voice during peer interactions • Uses Conscious Discipline peer conflict strategies • Uses safe hands during times of upset or peer conflict • Asks a teacher for help with peer conflict 				