

Steps for conflict prevention/management within a strength-based approach.

Step 1. Identify a problem and map out the Social Relationships

- Identify with your students a problem you would like to address as a group.
- Ask your students to think about and eventually note down the people they see as friends and who, according to them, is involved in the conflict. They keep their information secret.
- Now reflect with them:
- How many students do I see as friends?
- Who are my closest friends?

You may use [the Sociogram template](#) in *TEACHmi Teacher's Manual – Guide to Strength-based learning* to map out the Social Relationships in the classroom and involving families.

Step 2. Talk About the Conflict and an Explanation of the Strategy and Responsibilities.

- De-briefing: students receive an explanation about the problem(s).
- The discussion concerns the problems from the standpoint of the students and the teachers.
- It's made clear to the students that together they are responsible for solving the problem. The students, who were not involved, are also the students who knew about the conflict and did nothing about it. That's not acceptable.
- Others (teachers, parents and the neighbourhood) are seen as sources of potential support who can be utilized later.

The agreed strategy is as follows:

- ✓ **Phase 1:** The class is fully responsible to solve the conflicts and negative atmosphere.
- ✓ **Phase 2:** The responsibility of the class includes individual responsibilities of the students.
- ✓ **Phase 3:** Parents and other teachers are brought in, if needed.
- ✓ **Phase 4:** When the conflicts have decreased and the atmosphere has improved, the class needs to agree on how they will monitor the situation to avoid reoccurring issues.

Step 3. The First Discussion of Conflicts in the Class with a Restorative Circle

The principles of restorative circles are explained: **Annex I. How to create a restorative circle**

PHASE 1

Step 4. Students are Responsible as a **Group** for the Reduction of Conflict.

- The entire class is responsible to increase positive attitudes and diminish negative ones: neutral students (those not directly involved in the conflict) can support others or mediate.
- In the first week, the above is discussed with the students, but no agreement is made on how negative behaviour will be reduced.
- We tell the students that we first want to know how serious the negative behaviour was before we intervene. This happens with the tool: '**Class Improvement Card**' (**Annex III**).

This sheet is hung in a place where it is visible to everyone. The students get a week to make an inventory of the conflicts. Every student has the right to report a conflict or negative behaviour to the teacher. The student is allowed to explain how the conflict happened or to discuss it, but it's not obligatory.

At the end of the week, a Restorative Circle is held:

⇒ **Round 1:**

- First the actions are discussed where the offender attempted to compensate for the damage.
- The neutral third-party student leads the discussion.
- The students discuss ways to improve the actions that were not followed up on or were poorly executed. This point is repeated during every restorative circle until all of the activities are acceptably completed.

⇒ **Round 2:**

- The Class Improvement Card is discussed: in this round, the students can point to conflicts and map them.
- Some conflicts can remain anonymous, but when a student feels like a conflict or negative behaviour was not sufficiently discussed, it is possible to address the issue after the session.
- The student is allowed to speak individually with the teacher, while the teacher focusses once again on observable behaviour, naming the strengths found in negative behaviour.

⇒ **Round 3:**

- Based on the agreed strategies, the class makes additional class agreements and rules.
- Thereafter, the class comes together to discuss the reduction of negative behaviour: How many fewer conflicts or negative behaviours do we want to have next week? A reduction of 25% is a good start. That makes the goal realistic and ensures that a learning process is started where diverse behaviour can be learned.

⇒ **Round 4:**

Each student and teacher discuss whether it is realistic for them to achieve what has been agreed. A second column of the 'Class Improvement Card' is used to measure reductions.

Step 5. Follow Up and Adjustment for Fewer Conflicts and or Negative Behaviour.

Each week there is a new restorative circle where the 'Class Improvement Card' is discussed and agreements are adapted and revised. Here, we briefly discuss what the **possible results** could be.

⇒ The **negative behaviour decreases**.

When the class has 2 or 3 conflicts every 2 to 3 weeks, then, you can put the 'Improvement Card' aside. Every student can request to implement it again.

⇒ The **negative behaviour decreases, except in certain situations or certain places**.

At first glance, the teacher sees this as positive, because generally, negative behaviour has decreased. Then we observe whether the negative behaviour is connected to particular students or specific situations.

If it is connected to specific situations, then, the teacher can temporarily forbid them (e.g., when a large number of conflicts are connected to sports during free time, then, sports will be cancelled for a week).

- The class can 'earn back' sports when the entire class shows to be capable of decreasing conflicts in other situations. Afterwards and step-by-step, sports are re-integrated into the class.
- For example, first sports are allowed one day per week, then, two or three... During this period, the number of conflicts that are connected to specific circumstances may not increase.

If the negative behaviour appears to be connected to certain students, we then go to **Step 6 below**: the responsibility of the class is now extended to the responsibility of individual students.

PHASE 2

Step 6. The Responsibility of the Class is extended to the Responsibility of the **Individual** student.

When a particular student or students appear to be responsible for a specific behaviour, then, it is immediately stopped. Action is taken at the moment that a negative behaviour manifests itself.

Next to that, when one or more student(s) exhibit(s) negative or conflictual behaviour, we use the **'Individual Improvement Card' (Annex III)**. Under no circumstances are the 'Individual Improvement Cards' discussed with the entire class. Sometimes it might be discussed in a smaller group (when, for example, it concerns reoccurring conflicts amongst the same group of students) and sometimes only with the student involved.

- **Round 1:** the situations where the conflict manifests itself are mapped out. The teacher objectifies and asks the student(s) to name the strengths that were used. The negative behavioural strategies are discussed.
- **Round 2:** Alternative (and positive) behavioural strategies are discussed and connected to the strengths of the student(s). Based on these observations and discussions, the **'Individual Improvement Card' (Annex III)** is filled in.
- **Round 3:** For the 'Improvement Card' only one behaviour is chosen: the one resulting in the most negative impact. The negative behaviour is then translated into concrete and observable behaviour that is positive. At this point, the student's strengths must be utilized.

Examples:

- "Tom needs to improve his mood" is not a clear agreement.
- "Toms should try to do something that makes others happy" is clear.
- "Tom should try to leave others alone and should talk less" is an agreement that implies two strategies (i.e., leave others alone and talk less).

The class decides how often the students should employ this behaviour and when. When it concerns employing 'less or no behaviour', for example, leaving the others alone, then, the day is divided into different time blocks. During each block, it's determined whether the student was successful in refraining from the behaviour.

The student chooses whether the 'Individual Improvement Card' can be visible in the class or not. The teacher fills in the Card in agreement with the student.

The advantage of this approach is that conflicts do not become bigger because we accentuate them, but more alternative behavioural strategies can be developed for that kind of situation.

Where there are more students involved in a conflict, then, more students receive an 'Improvement Card'. Sometimes we ask who would like to volunteer to participate (so that more positive behaviour is noted).

Finally, the 'Individual Improvement Card' can be expanded to **achieve personal (learning) goals**. Students can use the 'Individual Improvement Card' at any time to record their strengths. In this way, **the Card becomes a 'norm' and a tool that belongs to the class culture**. Hence, the 'Individual Improvement Card' should be used for at least half of the student's personal (learning) goals.

PHASE 3

Step 7. Parents and Other Teachers Are Included in Individual and Class Activities.

This phase is announced beforehand. When we involve parents or the neighbourhood, we assume that they are there as support for the students. This can happen in three ways:

1. Young people receive an 'Individual Improvement Card' where behaviour outside of school is monitored.
2. Young people confer with parents, youth leaders or other important persons. The school can organize this.
3. Parents or neighbours are asked to monitor the young person so that his/her behaviour can be better mapped. We do this when the young person is incapable of objectifying his or her behaviour. We translate this for the young person as a lack of skill and not as a 'bad attitude', i.e.: "It's not yet possible for you to truthfully tell what you are doing; we're going to work on that together." We don't say: "You're lying." (And, absolutely not: "You're a liar").

It's very important from this phase onward to see changes in the young person's behaviour as an attempt to do things better and a willingness to experiment with different behavioural strategies. That's only possible when less appropriate or inadequate strategies are experimented with and not immediately punished.

The behaviour is translated to the young person's not yet implemented strengths with a revised 'Improvement Card' as a consequence.

Step 8. Completion of the Improvement Track and Consultations on How to Monitor.

When we base the track for improvement on strength-based learning, we try to:

- Include the entire class in the improvement track with restorative circles.
- Give responsibility to the young people as a class and then as individuals
- Objectify their behaviour, making it concrete and finding strengths
- Search for positive behavioural strategies that are based on their strengths
- Give time to practice positive behavioural strategies and introduce a learning process to unlearn negative behaviours in progressive steps
- Make this behaviour visible with the 'Improvement Card'
- Involve others (parents and neighbours) as a means of support
- Never assume that a young person is bad, but instead whether he or she has learned sufficient skills to be able to take advantage of positive behaviour
- See new or a different behaviour as a step forward, even when the behaviour isn't adequate to or appropriate for the situation.

When the class and the teachers have the feeling that the negative or conflictual behaviour has sufficiently decreased, then the track can be halted. The class develops a plan whereby this improvement track can be discussed again.

In the beginning, it's best to do this on a **weekly basis**. Afterwards, discussions can be reduced to **once a month**. Whatever the case, it's wise to put the issue back on the agenda after a school holiday. We often see conflicts and negative behaviours increase after these breaks as the students once again attempt to establish their social position within the group.

When the point is achieved that everyone thinks: “Why are we still talking about this?”, then, the class consultations can end.

□ ***Possible Intermediate Step: Measuring Energy or Feelings of Well-Being***

Students can monitor their feelings during the activity by using the **self-assessment tool at the end of this chapter**. Thanks to this tool, we can also map out the students’ well-being day-by-day. At the end of the week, they reflect on their top/flop moments. If students do not feel comfortable in sharing their feelings with the class, the teacher can discuss this individually. In other cases, the issue can be a topic of discussion in restorative circles.