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season to share

## Peaceful resolutions

**CONFLICT CENTER: A program started by a retired teacher and run out of her basement shows youths how to control the feelings and the situations that often result in violence and even death.**

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Seated in a court-ordered conflict-resolution class, 14-year-old Daniel Macias sums up the challenge for children growing up in a society where might makes right.

"It's hard not to fight," Daniel explains. "It's hard because sometimes you have to prove something to some people. Someone comes to you and talks stuff. You have to do something about it, or you get punked all the time."

Virgil Aguirre, an instructor at the Conflict Center, flinched at his student's words.

"I'm going to have to reinforce what I tell them," Aguirre says of Daniel and other young people in his evening class.

Aguirre and the rest of the Conflict Center staff will keep on talking. They'll talk as they have since 1987, when Liz Loescher, a retired middle-school teacher, invested her nest egg in the notion that speaking with your own mouth beats punching someone else's.

In a country that richly rewards aggressive behavior in business, sports, politics and just about every other endeavor, it has not been easy.

That's why the center is seeking funding from the Post-News Season to Share campaign.

When it comes to controlling anger and violence among children, failure is an ugly option. In Glenwood Springs, prosecutors will soon try a 14-year-old on charges of first-degree murder for allegedly shooting a 9-year-old acquaintance in what was little more than a spat over friendship. In Denver, prosecutors will try a teenager for allegedly stabbing to death another teen in a high-school cafeteria during lunch.

The devastating potential of fighting children is too often measured in death and prison. So the Conflict Center's mission is something more than platitudes. A third of the center's business comes from kids referred by the courts, said acting executive director Ron Ludwig. Many of those young people face jail time if they don't work out their anger and fighting problems. These are essentially good kids who need a diversion from bad paths.

As instructor Carema Cook tosses a ball of yarn around a circle formed with 18-year-old Chanel Scott, 15-year-old Shawntell Calvin, Shawntell's father and a student intern, Cook asks everyone to say words that make them feel "valued, safe and successful."

"Confidence," replies Shawntell.

"Encouragement," chimes in Chanel.

By the time the talk stops, the yarn forms a web on which Shawntell's dad places a balloon. It symbolizes a child secured by a safety net of family and community support. But it's not all so touchy-feely. Cook has led up to this drill by driving home the ways in which verbal confrontations or even an accidental bump can escalate into flying fists.

She has drawn a set of stairsteps on a dry-erase marker board and elicited from Shawntell and Chanel some recipes for violence.

You're already irritated. Toss in some belittling remarks, a dare, a laugh, a push, and you have all the ingredients to lose control.

Better, Cook tells her charges, to talk it out: "Think of ways to cool down that are legal and don't hurt you or someone else."

Cook explains the difference between aggressiveness, assertiveness and passivity. You can be assertive - confident, calm and direct - without being threatening or becoming someone's emotional or physical doormat.

"It made me think of all the things I can do to calm myself down," says Shawntell. "I had to take a class like this at school, but I was hard-headed."

The Conflict Center hopes to soften up others with elementary-school programs that train students to be "playground conflict managers," says Ludwig. Mediators have been placed on playgrounds at Foster Elementary School in Jefferson County and Harrington Elementary School in Denver, among others.

"They wear big green buttons" that identify them, Ludwig says.

Things have come a long way since Liz Loescher ran her conflict-resolution business out of the basement of her Denver home. For instance, her kids' bunk beds no longer serve as shelves. A donated two-story maze of offices at 4140 Tejon St. now houses the center.

In addition to its work with at-risk kids and elementary schools, the Conflict Center has just begun a three-year anti-bullying program at Denver's North High School.

"Most kids don't approve of bullying," says Ludwig, "but they're afraid to intervene."

The Conflict Center aims to empower them in times of crisis. More than that, though, it aims to keep things from ever reaching that level.

Sitting in Aguirre's class, 11-year-old Aldo Villa says conflict is like a volcano. In the beginning, it's spread wide enough at a broad base to be controlled. But by the time it funnels its way to a narrow top, it's under so much pressure that it has to erupt violently.

For nearly two decades, the Conflict Center has helped kids like Aldo and their parents to find a relief valve.