As adults responding to conflict, we struggle to overcome the mixed messages of our childhood: "Good children don't fight" but "Don't let a bully push you around!"; "Be proud you live in a free country" but "Don't discuss religion or politics."; "Think for yourself" but "Don't argue with me—just do as I say." For most of us, the cumulative lesson of youth has taught us that conflict is bad; ignore it as long as possible; and, as a last resort, fight to win.

How different a world it might be had we learned the ABCs of dispute resolution at an early age. What if we saw conflict as an inevitable companion to living, a signal that change might be in order, and an opportunity for collaborative problem solving? What if we possessed a repertoire of responses to conflict, and could use them with creativity, care and confidence?

During the 1960s and 1970s, some religious and social peace activists saw the wisdom of such early studies and produced conflict resolution curricula suitable for a variety of ages. For the most part, however, such efforts were isolated and not part of the mainstream of education. Individual teachers cautiously slipped these underground units into their lesson plans with little or no training and even less administrative support.

During the 1980s, more conscious and coordinated efforts to teach conflict resolution to young children began to take shape. In 1981, teachers and parents seeking ways in which education might help prevent nuclear war founded a national group, Educators for Social Responsibility. ESR, which now has a network of local chapters around the country, tackled the formidable task of legitimizing the study of the unthinkable—nuclear war. At the same time, ESR focused considerable resources in the area of teacher training.

While educators mobilized around the need to inform young people about the threat of nuclear war and the importance of global interdependence, a separate but related educational movement was simultaneously percolating within the emerging dispute resolution field. To address the need for a more responsive and accessible justice system, dozens and soon hundreds of neighborhood justice centers were formed throughout the United States. Relying on a synthesis of skills borrowed from the labor mediation field and community empowerment programs, these centers trained community members to mediate disputes ranging from small-scale interpersonal conflicts to community-wide disturbances.

The opportunity to learn and immediately practice effective, nonadver-
sarial ways to resolve differences led some in this field to the intriguing possibility of introducing conflict management concepts into the classroom. "Why wait," they wondered, "to master these skills at my age, when so many bad habits must first be unlearned?" Some translated their interest into action. They reached out to local schools and began to develop elementary and secondary conflict resolution programs. In 1984, people affiliated with such programs, and those interested in designing similar programs, formed NAME, the National Association for Mediation in Education.

The creation of these two national groups, ESR and NAME, is an indicator of a growing trend toward teaching conflict management skills at an early age. My purpose here is to: focus on the contributions made to this movement by the dispute resolution field; examine several school-based conflict resolution approaches; and draw some conclusions about the values and goals of these programs and the means used to reach them. Lastly, I wish to speculate about the responsibilities, challenges, potential contradictions, and opportunities that accompany this bottom-up contemporary attempt to transform society's attitude toward conflict through early education.

Getting SMART

One program that has served as a model for many others is SMART. SMART is the acronym for School Mediators’ Alternative Resolution Team, initiated in 1983 by New York's largest mediation center, the Victim Services Agency. VSA's interest in school mediation stemmed from its community work and its participation in a mayoral task force on school safety.

Inspired by a school-based mediation project operating in Suffolk County, New York since 1980, VSA convinced school officials and potential funders that a mediation program at the William Cullen Bryant School in Long Island City, Queens, could decrease tension and violence among students, and provide school administrators with a new mechanism for addressing school conflict. It also emphasized that the program could teach students new skills in communication and conflict resolution; empower them to assume responsibility for resolving conflicts without adult intervention; and build a stronger sense of community and cooperation between students, parents and faculty.

Bryant was selected as a pilot site because of its enrollment (just under 3,000); the diverse ethnic background of its students (42% White, 29% Hispanic, 17% Black, 12% Asian, and 1% American Indian); and the principal's interest in the innovative program. VSA asked the school to provide office space and a commitment to include mediation as an official part of the school's discipline system. Other expenses, such as the coordinator's salary and training costs, were borne by the New York City Youth Bureau.

The program has four basic components: 1. Classroom seminars designed to generate campus-wide interest in mediation and to recruit mediators and cases; 2. Training of those interested in becoming mediators; 3. Actual mediation of intra-student, intra-family and student-teacher conflicts by those who successfully complete the training; and 4. Follow-up on all mediated cases to assess compliance and to offer additional service, if necessary.

Joseph B. Stulberg, one of the most prominent mediation trainers in the United States, was hired to design and conduct the initial and subsequent SMART trainings. Each training program lasts 20 hours and involves 25 partic-