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EDITORIALS

The 'cool down' revolution

By NADINE EPSTEIN

I RECENTLY was speaking with a childhood friend with whom I went to elementary school about 30 years ago. I was trying to persuade him to come to our class reunion, but he wasn't buying it. He complained about the bullying of those years.

It's true, bullies ruled in our era, but things have changed since we played in schoolyards and backyards, resolving conflicts by the power of the fist. Children and how we bring them up are not the same. It may not be very noticeable to us, but I bet that 200 years from now social historians will look back at a revolution unfolding.

I first glimpsed the intimations of change a few years ago in my family room. I was cooking in the kitchen when angry walls erupted from the room where my son, Noah, and his dear friend, Georgia, both 6, were happily playing.

"It's mine!"

"No, it's mine!"

I ran into the room to find both children sobbing.

"He took my Nanook, I was playing with Nanook," Georgia cried, grabbing the gray-and-white Beanie Baby husky out of Noah's hand.

Noah held his arm out to me and cried, "Look, she bit me, Mommy."

Before I could open my mouth, Noah and Georgia were in the first stages of resolving the conflict — on their own. "Cool down," Georgia commanded, as tears streamed down her cheeks.

The children backed away from each other to sulk in opposite corners, their bodies tense with anger and hurt. Then came "I" messages.

"I don't like when you take my toy," Georgia said. "It makes me feel angry."

Noah listened carefully, and when she was finished, he said, "I don't like it when you bite. It hurts."

I was amazed. These two first-graders were pros at this and had obviously done it before, out of earshot of parents. I watched as the children relaxed at their own pace.

Noah recovered first, asking Georgia if she was ready to be friends again. Georgia wasn't, so she shook her head and crawled into my arms, still sniffing.

Suddenly she jumped up and turned to Noah. "I won't bite you again," she announced.

"Here, take Nanook — it's your turn," Noah replied happily, handing her the much-loved

stuffed mush dog.

It was over, conflict processed and duly noted. They began throwing Beanie Babies at one another in a fun-filled, healing free-for-all.

Let me assure you that when my friend from elementary school and I were growing up, I never saw two children resolve a conflict like this. I didn't see any grownups doing it, either.

Noah and Georgia are among the fortunate people who have learned this skill, and it is a skill. They had picked it up in school, and at 6, they were more adept at it than most adults. They are now 11, and they still make use of these conflict resolution techniques, although they sometimes don't realize it because they've incorporated them into their individual set of social skills.

Over the 30-plus years since my friend and I graduated from elementary school, conflict resolution and violence prevention programs have made their way into three-quarters of our nation's schools.

Although our world still has too much violence, rudeness and hatred, children and adults are now trying skills that help resolve conflict and improve communication. At the very least, more people are aware that it is

worthwhile to listen compassionately and to acknowledge the other person's position.

This may not sound like much in a world of wars and corporate crime, but I think it is an amazing change in human behavior, one worth paying attention to.

When did this revolution sneak up on us? Long sheltered in academia, it grew out of Cold War efforts to solve international disputes, drawing from teachings of Quakers and Mennonites, Mahatma Gandhi and social scientists and psychologists.

It took several decades for these ideas to trickle down to my family room, and I'm afraid it's going to take several more decades to trickle up from family rooms to the smoke-free rooms of political power. But I am an optimist. I know when it'll happen.

We'll have to wait until Noah and Georgia and others of their generation are ready to leave playgrounds and playrooms behind and take their conflict resolution skills with them into the world of politics.

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