

Case Study

Reducing tensions in a stand-off between warring groups

Background

Tensions had escalated between two groups with a history of hostility. These tensions often escalated into violence. The case began with a call to one of our mediators. The caller who knew both parties was worried that one of the parties was on the verge of violence. The mediator and the mediation service were well known in the area and trusted as independent and impartial.

What we did

Given that the caller knew the parties and was familiar with our service it was relatively straightforward to gain an introduction. Both the parties agreed to speak with the mediator independently as a first step.

The first party

He was really angry and spent the first part of the meeting threatening violence. It took some time to understand the problem but using compassionate and empathic responses the mediator was able to establish that he was the father of a baby and the baby's mother was now in a relationship with the other party. He had been told by a friend of the mother that her new boyfriend was not going to allow him (the father) to see his baby. He had taken this up with the mother although the discussion became heated and was left in a bad place. The mother's boyfriend had jumped to the defence of his girlfriend and threatened the father for verbally attacking his girlfriend.

The second party

He had been in a relationship with his girlfriend for 6 months. During this time he had heard her complain that the father of her baby had not provided any financial support and that when she asked him for money he became hostile. On one occasion he came home to find her in a state. She said the father had been round and was shouting at her and that no one was going to stop him seeing his child. The

second party decided to defend his girlfriend and went to the first party demanding that he stop his aggression.

The escalation

Each of the parties consulted their respective friends who fuelled the dispute by supporting their side as being right. Threats were passed by proxy and the tensions were spreading. The caller felt the problem had grown disproportionately.

Our observations

It was clear that although both parties were defending something precious (the first party defending his relationship with his baby and the second party defending his girlfriend), that the actual dispute was based on gossip and misinterpretation. The mother's friend had meddled, with potentially fatal consequences.

Working with the parties prior to a face to face meeting the mediator was able to establish that the second party did not want to stop him seeing his baby nor did he want to pass any comment on the aspect of financial support for the baby. He was, however, simply asking that he treat the baby's mother with respect.

The first party wanted to be sure that he could see his baby, he felt some shame and embarrassment that he could not provide financially and constantly felt that the mother was holding this as a threat. It was this sense and their inability to communicate with each other that triggered the angry reactions.

The mediation

Having done so much ground work ahead of time, the face to face meeting was relatively straightforward. The miscommunication was cleared up and an understanding reached about the needs of each party. Tensions immediately reduced and a situation that could have had fatal consequences was alleviated.