

Making Sense of Conflict: Seeking Solutions Together

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We need young adults who can think and act creatively, who value human life, are able to make discerning decisions, and know how to communicate and negotiate rather than fight. It is our responsibility as guardians of these values to establish learning environments that foster freedom and responsibility.

-- N. Rogers

In all settings where young children play together, social conflicts arise. Disputes occur over everything from who gets to use the newest truck to how long each child's turn on the swing should be. Toddlers and preschoolers like to initiate their own activities and, at times, their goals and actions conflict with those of other children. Common subjects of conflict include control of play materials (e.g., two children want to wear the same blue dress) and choice of activity (e.g., a child wants to play with his friend in the sandbox but the friend wants to play on the tire swing). Similar arguments occur at home as siblings or friends negotiate use of toys and as families navigate through daily routines.

When these kinds of conflicts arise, it is important to consider not only effective ways to end the conflict in the moment, but also our long-term goals for children's growth. The development of *social competence* is one of the most important goals we work to foster in early childhood programs, just as parents do at home. Social competence is defined as "the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across situations" (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992). It is every bit as challenging as it sounds.



Recent years have brought a surge of research emphasizing the important links between social competence and school success. Very early on, children who demonstrate anti-social behavior, such as excessive aggression, participate less in classroom activities and are less likely to be accepted by peers and teachers. In fact, emotional, social, and behavioral competence in early child-

hood can predict children's academic performance as early as first grade. Kindergarten teachers expect children to come to their classrooms ready to participate constructively with others. It is up to us as parents and teachers to provide children with the tools to build this required social competence.

The development of conflict resolution skills is central to children's social competence. Through engaging in constructive conflict resolution, children learn to express needs, ideas, and strong feelings, develop trust in others, hear and respect varying points of view, and experience the give-and-take of relationships. They become motivated to behave more prosocially, learn how to make constructive choices, and feel in control of positive, cooperative outcomes. Beginning to learn these skills at an early age also helps children acquire the confidence and attitudes to approach social challenges constructively throughout life.

Several maturational factors contribute to young children's less than proficient conflict resolution skills. During these first five years of life, they have limited ability to "decenter," or take a perspective other than their own. Toddlers are just beginning to understand that others have independent thoughts and feelings. Older children can sometimes acknowledge that another's feelings and opinions are as valid as their own, although this can be a stretch even for us as adults. Young children can observe the effects of their actions on playmates, however, and, with substantial adult help, stop their hurtful actions and change course. The motivation to do this will be stronger if they share a sense of community and relationship with their playmates.



In addition to empathy and perspective-taking skills, children must develop the ability to recognize and label emotions—their own and those of others. Attaching words to feelings increases self-awareness and has a strong calming effect. When children become able to use language instead of physical aggression to express their feelings during conflicts, new possibilities for peaceful resolutions open up.

Finally, the development of self-regulation capacities is a major challenge of the early years. As parents of teenagers can attest, the executive functions of the brain that allow us to resist our impulses, focus our attention, and appropriately channel our strong emotions are not fully developed until early adulthood. Young children, in particular, live in the moment rather than planning for consequences and deferring gratification. We do see huge growth in all of these capacities between infancy and school age, but again, strong social support is key.

With this background knowledge of development, coupled with our long-range goal of building social competence, how can we equip children to handle and learn from the social conflicts that will inevitably occur? Research and our own experience have found two strategies to be key: *modeling and mediated practice*. Both can be challenging, but both can be successfully employed by any motivated adult in a child's life.

Imitation is a powerful aspect of learning, and children readily mimic their adult models. They watch carefully as the adults in their environment manage their own conflict, frustration and anger. It is important, therefore, for adults to model calm, constructive conflict resolution skills. Describing aloud one's own emotions during stressful situations (e.g., "I was really upset when Daddy forgot to stop at the store and buy bread,") helps a child to tune in to the coping skills you used in the moment. Following up with, "I know he was in a hurry," highlights your own perspective-taking process.

Just as important as having positive adult models is the opportunity for mediated practice of emerging skills. Young children often do not yet have the strategies to solve a difficult conflict on their own; so while it is important to allow them the opportunity to try, adults will frequently need to provide support and guide them through the process. Modeling, encouragement, discussion, and verbal prompts, rather than simply solving the problem for children, will build their skills for future success.

When a conflict arises, we use and teach a six-step "problem-solving sequence" to support children in resolving it. Its complexity varies by age group, but the steps remain the same. With time and practice, the process becomes automatic and smooth for both adults and children:



- 1) **Approach calmly and stop any harmful actions.** If necessary, place yourself between the children. Get down on their physical level to convey that you are there to work *with* them. In addition, keep your *voice at a conversational level* and offer a *gentle touch* to children who are upset and angry.
- 2) **Acknowledge feelings.** Describe the feelings you observe and the details of what you see. This is important because, although young children are developing perspective and empathy, it is still difficult for them to consider the needs and wants of others. Validating their experience, as well as that of the other child, will help them build awareness of others and facilitate their social competence (e.g., "Sasha, it looks like you want to knock down the blocks. Nathan looks upset. He doesn't like it when you knock down the blocks").
- 3) **Gather information.** Observe younger children's actions and describe the problem as you understand it. With older preschoolers, ask open-ended questions and listen carefully to children's responses; this allows them to have their ideas heard (e.g., "What's happening here? I see you are both holding the truck...Julian, you're saying you want the truck and McKenna, you're saying you want the truck, too.>").
- 4) **Restate the problem.** Repeat the information you observed or heard to verify that you have understood the conflict correctly. (e.g., "So you all want to sit on the couch but there is only room for two. We have a problem.>").
- 5) **Ask for ideas and solutions and choose one together.** Encourage the children to talk about a solution they can implement together (e.g., "Okay, what can we do to solve our problem?"). This allows children to feel more ownership of the outcome. After a solution is suggested, the adult should check to make sure that the solution is acceptable to both children (e.g., "Morgan your idea is that you ride the swing first and then Lila can have a turn. What do you think, Lila?"). If they are unable to provide their own ideas, offer them choices.
- 6) **Provide follow-up support as needed.** Comment on the children's efforts and the problem-solving process they have used (e.g., "You guys figured it out. Melissa will play with the dress for three minutes and then Jun-ho will have a turn for three minutes.>"). Sometimes solutions need to be revisited as children begin to play again. Try to stay nearby to provide follow-up support as needed.

Conflict between young children is an inevitable and necessary part of their successful social-emotional development. In the short-term, using these intensive modeling and guidance strategies can be exhausting. In the long term, this approach will help children develop the social competence they will need throughout life. You will find yourself walking through these six conflict resolution steps again and again and again, just as we do at preschool. The reward will be that, eventually, you will watch your children skillfully do it themselves. That is the ultimate goal we all share.

References available upon request.