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every parent's security blanket



***CONFLICT BETWEEN CHILDREN:
HOW ADULTS CAN HELP***

INTRODUCTION

Conflict situations often arise between a child and their peers or siblings. Conflict situations should be viewed as powerful opportunities for adults to strengthen a child's communication skills as well as to develop their problem-solving skills.

Careful adult intervention at times of conflict is important. What words, strategies and techniques can be used to help with the conflict situations? How can you promote communication skills in children? How can you encourage problem-solving skills? This article explores helping children resolve conflict situations.

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GOAL # 1: STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The primary goal in a conflict situation should be to strengthen childrens' communication skills by having each child express themselves in words and by having each child listen to the other child. Who gets to play with the fire engine first is less important than how each child's feelings are expressed and heard. Effective talking and listening skills should be modeled, encouraged, and reinforced.

The communication goal for each child is:

- To have a voice, that is, to express themselves in words.
- To be a good listener to the other child.

GOAL #2: ENCOURAGE PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

The secondary goal in a conflict situation is for adults to encourage the childrens' problem-solving skills by having them participate in strategizing toward a mutually-satisfying solution.

The problem-solving goal for each child is:

- To strategize with the other child to find a resolution that is satisfying for each child.

GUIDELINES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Guideline #1: Anticipate conflict situations

The ideal way to deal with a conflict situation is to anticipate the situation and prevent any conflict before it occurs. Often your physical presence as you stand close to children in these situations can impose enough outer control to avert conflicts from occurring or escalating.

Some situations which often evoke conflicts in children:

- Challenging chemistry, when children have been involved in conflicts with each other before, requires watchfulness from adults.
- Physical activities can easily lead to physical aggression. Carefully monitor activities such as block-building, racing cars, jumping, gymnastics, running, and rough-and-tumble outdoor play.
- Close physical contact, such as waiting in line or standing together at the sand table, can strain the limits of personal space and contribute to conflicts.

- ☑ The presence of a new or interesting object may lead to conflicts over sharing.
- ☑ The presence of young children who are dealing with impulse control issues can contribute to conflicts.
- ☑ Transition times, where children are changing from one activity to another, such as stopping play and cleaning up toys or leaving the house and going to the car, often offer challenges for young children and provide opportunities for conflict.

Guideline #2: Be physically present as soon as a conflict seems imminent

With young children, it is always important for you to be nearby as soon as you hear or see a conflict arise. Young children are working on impulse control and physical aggression can occur rapidly. Often your physical presence can calm a situation.

If the children are using words, you can listen and intervene if the interaction seems to be escalating; if there is not an escalation, you can provide verbal reinforcement for their using words and their listening to each other. If the children are being physically aggressive, you need to intervene immediately to protect the children and to turn the physical aggression into verbal expression.

Guideline #3: No shame, no blame.

Shame and blame are not helpful. Sometimes the conflict between two children began a minute ago or an hour ago (or, with siblings, sometimes two years ago when the youngest was born!) and has carried over to the current situation, so determining who started the conflict is usually not helpful. In most conflict situations, feelings on both sides are very understandable. In addition, assigning blame puts the conflict in an unnecessarily judgment-oriented framework.

As stated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's brochures on Developmentally Appropriate Practices, "*Young children do not always understand and remember the rules.*" Try to remember that these children are doing the best they can at this moment. Bringing compassion to the conflict situation, rather than shame or blame, is more helpful and effective.

Guideline #4. Communication is more important than resolution

Once again, encouraging communication skills—mutual listening and talking—is more important than the end result of the conflict. The process is more important than the outcome.

Guideline #5. Apologies should be genuine & not on an adult's schedule

Often, adults want to relieve their own anxiety about a conflict and wrap the situation up with a pretty bow by having children apologize to each other immediately. Some children are not feeling apologetic at that time, so that the "I'm sorry" is often not genuine at that moment. Rather than put words into a child's mouth, it is better for adults to focus on the goals and process and re-visit an apology within ten or fifteen minutes, when a child may feel calmer and more amenable to regrets about the situation.

"I like how you, Rashad, spoke and Kerry listened. I like how Kerry spoke and Rashad listened. It was good that we could talk about how to share the fire engine. Good talking. And I like how you agreed to a sharing schedule. Good problem-solving skills, too. In a few minutes, when you are not so upset, we can talk more about what happened and perhaps share apologies."

IN-THE-MOMENT OF CONFLICT: STEP-BY-STEP

Be Calm & Neutral: "I See/I Hear..."

- Step 0. Calm yourself with some deep breaths as you approach the situation. Center yourself as much as possible.
- Step 1. Get down on the children's level. Enter their sensory sphere of sight and hearing—be within one foot of the children and at their eye level.
- Step 2. Have neutral body language. Your body language sets the tone of your fairness and neutrality. Either have a hand on both children's shoulders or waists or have your hands by your side. Avoid putting your arm around one child's shoulders—this immediately has you taking sides and makes for a more complicated triangle, especially with siblings.
- Step 3. Use a calm voice. Your tone can help calm the conflict.
- Step 4. Describe the situation in neutral terms. Describe what you see or hear. This may ease the conflict as well as provide you with an additional few moments to calm yourself and to think.

"I hear some angry voices."

"I see two upset faces."

"I hear some crying."

"I hear some frustrated words."

Encourage Communication Skills: "We Need To Talk And Listen..."

- Step 5. If there was no aggression, encourage communication skills by structuring the talking and listening.

"I see that you are both holding the doll. I'll hold the doll while we talk. Shirrad, tell us what you want...Good words and good listening, Tina. Now Tina, tell us what you are feeling...Good talking, Tina, and good listening Shirrad."

- Step 6. If there was physical aggression, tend to the alleged victim and then talk.

"Raffi seems to be hurt. Friends are for hugging, not for hitting. Let's get a cold washcloth for his cheek and then we can all talk. Sammy, please help me get a washcloth....Now let's talk about what happened."

- Step 7. If a child can't talk at this time, channel the child's intense feelings into an activity that helps them calm down. A child may be so upset by a conflict that they may need a short time and an activity, such as playdough, hugs, or jumping up and down, to calm themselves. They can then return to resolve the situation by talking and listening.

Encourage Problem-Solving Skills: "How Can We Solve This?"

- Step 7. Ask for solutions from each child. For younger children, offer one or two possible solutions. Ask each child how they feel about each solution. During this exchange, continue verbally encouraging each child's words and each child's listening skills.

- Step 8. If mutual problem-solving is not working, choose the resolution yourself. After several attempts at problem-solving haven't worked, take charge of the situation yourself. Either decide on the sharing schedule, put the object aside for a period of time, or decide that the children need to play apart for a short time.

"Elana, I like how you talked and Gabriella listened. Gabriella, I like how you talked and Elana listened. It seems that you cannot agree on a way to share the doll. Since you cannot choose a common solution, I will choose what needs to happen."

Note: In a sharing conflict, sometimes handing one child an hourglass sand timer can distract them, give them something to hold in their hand, and provide a means so that the child who is waiting doesn't feel deprived. Sand timers are invaluable both at home and in the classroom.

When I taught a classroom of fifteen three-year-olds, we had several hourglass sand timers in the classroom. The beauty of the sand timer technique is that children soon begin using

sand timers for sharing among themselves without needing any adult intervention in sharing conflicts.

"Ja, you hold the hourglass sand timer while Katerina plays with the dinosaur for three minutes. Then you can play with the dinosaur for three minutes while Katerina holds the sand timer. Ja, Let's watch the grains of sand as they fall down to the bottom of the timer."

Examples

TWO CHILDREN ARE HAVING A TUG-OF-WAR OVER A FIRE TRUCK

- Be calm and neutral. As you approach the situation, take some breaths, center yourself, calm your voice, get down on the children's level, and keep your body language neutral (either gently touch both children or neither).

You: *"I see some upset children. There seems to be a problem."*

- Encourage communication skills.

You: *"Angela, use your words. Tell us what you want."*

Angela: *"I want it!!! It's MINE!"*

You: *"Good words, Angela. Good listening, Ryan. Now, Ryan, tell Angela what you want."*

Ryan: *"It's MINE! I WANT THE FIRE TRUCK! I HAD IT FIRST!"*

You: *"Good words, Ryan. Good listening, Angela."*

If there is still a tug-of-war at this point over the fire truck, you may need to take control of the fire truck yourself so that you can continue communicating and strategizing.

You: *"I need to hold the truck or put it up so we can talk."*

- Encourage problem-solving skills.

You: *"We have one fire truck and two children who want the fire truck. What should we do?"*

Listen to the children, encouraging their words and their listening skills and problem-solving skills (*"Good thinking."* *"Interesting idea."*) You can then suggest taking turns with a sand timer or clock or suggest distractions. In the case of an impasse, you decide.

You: *"You both seem to be having a hard time finding a solution that you agree on. I'll decide. This is what we will do with the fire truck...."*

ONE CHILD HITS ANOTHER CHILD

A young child hits another child when that child takes away the book she is reading. Both children start crying.

- Be calm and neutral. As you approach the situation, take some breaths, center yourself, calm your voice, get down on the children's level, keep your body language neutral (either gently touch each child or neither) and say, "I see some upset children."

First tend to the child that has been hit. *"Are you okay? You had your body hit."* By tending to the presumed victim first, the possibility of your child being the physical aggressor as a means of seeking negative attention is diminished. Then turn your attention to the other child.

- Encourage communication skills. Provide guidance on how these children can talk and listen to re-establish their relationship and on how to deal with this situation in the future.

You: *"You seem very angry. Hitting hurts people. Your hands are for gentle touches. Use gentle hands. Let's see if your friend needs a cold washcloth or a band-aid. Then let's talk with your friend about your angry feelings."*

Note: More details on dealing with physical aggression and consequences are provided in the iBlankie articles [Aggression at Home](#), [Aggression in Class](#), and [Anger Management for Children](#).

- Encourage problem-solving skills. Do mutual problem-solving with the children regarding the conflict situation and how to repair the hurt feelings from the physical aggression.

You: *"There is one book and two children who want to look at the book. What should we do?"*

FAQ

Q. My children are two and four years old. I am not sure when to intervene when they fight and when to try to let them work it out themselves. Please advise.

All young children are working on impulse control and things can be particularly intense between siblings. As long as one of your children is six years old or younger you should try to be within sight and earshot of them playing together to know if there is conflict.

At the first sign of conflict, you should move closer, within at least several feet, so that your physical presence may calm them. Encourage their words, *"I like your words,"* and intervene prior to any physical contact. At first, think of yourself as a coach, encouraging good words and partnering around problem-solving strategies. If things escalate, think of yourself as a referee, setting limits if there are any physical "fouls."

Q. My children fight all the time. What can I do?

First of all, it is important to get a realistic evaluation of how often your children do fight. In my experience, parents may say that their children fight 80% of the time but, after re-evaluating, decide that their children fight only 15-20% of the time. The intensity of siblings' fighting can be so disturbing to parents, both in terms of dealing with the present conflicts and in terms of the difficult memories of their own childhood sibling conflicts, that parents tend to experience their children's disagreements very intensely. The fighting feels more frequent because of the intensity involved.

Secondly, the most important way to minimize sibling competition and conflict is for each parent to have one-on-one time with each child separately as often as possible. Ideally, Together Time two to three times a week, for thirty minutes each time, where the child is choosing the playtime activity, can alleviate a great deal of sibling rivalry and conflict. This is special time where you focus solely on your child and totally engage with them in their play. Think of this as a date: give it a name like Dad and Daughter Time or Together Time, put it on your family calendar, talk about it before and afterwards (*"I smile every time I think about the LEGO castle we made during Together Time."*). Having a special connection often and separately with each child is very powerful in turning sibling binds into sibling bonds.

SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING

Conflict situations often arise between a child and their peers or siblings. This article has explored how to use conflict situations as powerful opportunities for adults to strengthen a child's communication skills as well as to encourage their problem-solving skills.

Please see the iBlankie articles [Anger Management for Children](#), [Aggression at Home](#), and [Aggression in Class](#) for further details of dealing with children's angry feelings.

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