

Helping Children Resolve Peer Conflict

by Stephen Green, Ph.D., and Jonathan Thomas

Dealing with conflict between children can be extremely frustrating; however, peer conflict is an entirely normal part of growing up. Researchers have found that children are likely to engage in up to eight peer conflicts per hour during a typical day (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Oberle, & Wahl, 2000). While this may seem excessive, most conflicts tend to be short in duration (i.e., around 30 seconds) and are often resolved by the children themselves with little or no guidance from adults.

Although not all of children's conflicts require adult intervention, it is important for adults to teach children how to handle conflict effectively at an early age. Studies indicate that violent behaviors are often learned as early as kindergarten, if not before (Stevahn et al., 2000). Without proper intervention, these behaviors tend to worsen. It has been discovered that by the age of eight, many of the violent behaviors exhibited during the kindergarten years are very difficult to change. For this reason, experts recommend that children be taught conflict resolution skills as early as possible. The more often children are exposed to constructive conflict management, the more likely they will be to retain the skills needed to resolve conflict with their peers as they grow older.

As a child care provider, you have an excellent opportunity to equip the children in your care with conflict resolution skills that will benefit them both now and in their future relationships.

Why Children Engage in Peer Conflict

Children engage in conflict with their peers for a variety of reasons, some of which include:

- **Self-Centeredness** – Developmentally, young children tend to be self-centered and, therefore, have difficulty seeing the perspective of others. This can lead to conflicts over objects (e.g., toys), space (e.g., "That's my chair!"), and rules (e.g., taking turns).
- **Limited Social Skills** – Due to their stage of development and lack of experience, many children haven't refined their social skills (e.g., communication and problem-solving) to the point that they are able to prevent simple disagreements from turning into more serious arguments.
- **Unmet Needs** – Some children, due to unmet physical, social, and emotional needs, simply want attention from adults or others in their peer group. Engaging in conflict, even if it brings negative attention, is one way to become noticed.



- **Tiredness/Fatigue** – Being tired or fatigued due to the lack of sleep or an illness is another basic reason why children engage in conflict.
- **Poor Adult Role Modeling** – Some children grow up in homes or are surrounded by adults who fail to model appropriate ways to handle conflict. Often, these children tend to model whatever conflict resolution strategies are used by the adults in their lives. Unfortunately, this sometimes involves negative strategies such as yelling and hitting.

Positive and Negative Consequences of Conflict

Positive

Should all conflict between children be viewed negatively?

Certainly not. In fact, conflict is an inevitable part of any close relationship.

It is through conflict that children develop the social and emotional skills they will need to negotiate future relationships (e.g., work, friendship, marriage). Through conflict, children learn to identify and express emotions in healthy ways. They learn to balance their wants and needs with those of others by developing empathy (i.e., the ability to see things from another's perspective). They learn how their actions impact others in positive and negative ways. Dealing with conflict also helps children develop important problem-solving skills, which can be applied in other situations and later life circumstances.



Negative

Conflict becomes negative when it is handled poorly and/or escalates to a point where children are emotionally or physically hurt. Some of the negative consequences associated with conflict may include physical violence (e.g., pushing, hitting, kicking, biting) or injury, emotional outbursts (e.g., yelling, screaming), fear, name calling, isolation from peers, teasing, bullying, and hurt feelings. Depending on the situation, another potential consequence of conflict is avoiding it all together. This can be unhealthy in the sense that children may develop a tendency to allow others to take advantage of them instead of working toward solutions that benefit all those involved.

An Inside Look at Children's Peer Conflicts

Researchers have found that children's conflicts tend to fall into three basic categories (Wheeler, 1994):

- control of the physical or social environment (e.g., play areas, toys, type of games played);
- morality (e.g., individual rights); and
- social order (e.g., rules for activities).

Depending on their age and developmental stage, during conflict children are likely to use a variety of physical and/or verbal strategies, which may or may not be aggressive. The strategies that children rely on are closely related to the type of issue under consideration and the age of the child. For example, object conflicts involving young children tend to involve physical resistance; whereas, verbal protests are used more frequently as children grow older. Regardless of the tactics used, children's conflicts will typically end up in one of the following ways:

- The situation will remain unresolved.
- An adult will impose a solution, not allowing the children to learn how to manage conflicts themselves.
- One child will submit to the other, in which case the submissive child could end up in an unfair situation.
- The conflict could be resolved by implementing a mutually agreed upon solution in which both children gain from the interaction.

It is through play that children develop fine and gross motor skills, learn about rules of socialization, and enhance their cognitive skills. However, many of the conflicts that arise between children take place during play activities. Researchers have found that children's conflicts during play are influenced by the play setting, children's prior relationships with each other, and whether or not adults are present. Conflicts during play times tend to be more common when children are confined to small play areas with only a single entrance. Some other interesting facts related to children's conflicts and play include:

- Children playing together before conflict are more likely to resolve disputes.
- Children engaged in cooperative play use less aggression than children engaged in solitary/parallel play.
- Children are more likely to take responsibility for interactions and generate their own solutions when adults are not physically present in the play area.

Conflict Mediation Model

Due to a variety of reasons (e.g., developmental variations among children, cultural differences), there isn't an "ideal" model of conflict resolution that can be applied to all children in all circumstances; however, there are some helpful models that include steps to work with the children in your care to resolve conflicts in an effective manner. The following model, which was developed by faculty at the University of Nebraska (Kostelnik et al.), can be adapted and utilized with both younger (preschool) and older children (school-age).

The model focuses on conflict mediation and was designed to help children learn skills (e.g., communication, compromise, ability to consider perspective of another) to reach peaceful

solutions with their peers. The adult mediator (i.e., the child care provider in this case) serves as an instructor and supports children as they learn problem-solving procedures and a new vocabulary. Children are not expected to learn the model immediately, but over time, they will become increasingly capable of solving problems for themselves. The model, as presented below, has been slightly adapted to account for age differences in children.

Step 1: Initiating the Mediation Process

- *Stop aggressive behavior.* Position yourself between the feuding children so that the children begin to focus on you rather than one another.
- *Focus and calm the children.* Conflict can become very emotional, especially if someone feels threatened or gets hurt as a result. Give attention/comfort to each child; however, children who are “victims” need your attention first. Wait for children to be moderately settled before moving on.
- *Define the problem.* Who was involved? What events precipitated the conflict? How did the children respond to one another (e.g., physical aggression, name calling, etc.)? Has this problem happened in the past?

Step 2: Clarifying Each Child’s Perspective

- *Allow each child to share his/her perspective.* Children, like adults, tend to see things from different perspectives. It is important to provide each child with an opportunity to share their “version” of the conflict. Obviously, very young children will be limited in terms of their verbal skills; therefore, you will need to be more involved in helping them express their feelings.
- *Do not interrupt.* As each child goes through this process, try not to interrupt. Likewise, encourage the children to simply listen when it is not their turn, reminding them that they will also have an opportunity to share their views on the situation.
- *Paraphrase each child’s point of view.* After the children have had a chance to share their side of the story, succinctly paraphrase each child’s point of view. Check with each child to see if you have correctly understood their viewpoint.

Step 3: Summing Up

- *Define the dispute in mutual terms.* Help children understand that conflict is a shared problem. Children will be more likely to cooperate with you and their peers if they know that they cannot move forward unless they work together.
- *Make sure each child has responsibility for both the problem and the solution.* While cases do exist in which one child seems to be entirely innocent, there is usually enough blame to go around. Children need to be taught that they both have a responsibility for dealing with the problem and coming up with a workable solution. For example, Billy may hit Johnny after Johnny calls Billy a derogatory name. In this case, Billy and Johnny both did something wrong. Billy needs to admit that he shouldn’t have hit Johnny. Johnny needs to admit that he was wrong when he called Billy a bad

name. Once they acknowledge their part in the conflict, they can move to the next step.

Step 4: Generating Alternatives

- *Solicit input from children.* Consider the ages and developmental stages of the children involved. For younger children (i.e., under three years of age), you will need to take an active/directive role in helping them come up with alternative solutions (e.g., What if we give Sarah 5 minutes to play with the toy? After her time is up, it will be your turn to play with the toy for 5 minutes.). For older children, encourage them to come up with their own ideas.
- *Brainstorm possible solutions.* Ask children to come up with many possible solutions. Avoid offering advice on the merits of each solution. The important thing at this stage is to simply have the children think about alternatives.
- *Ask each child if the solution will work.* In many cases, there won’t be a single solution to a problem. Instead, children will likely come up with several ideas that might resolve the conflict. After a solution is offered, ask each child if the solution could possibly work.

Step 5: Agreeing on a Solution

- *Create a mutually satisfying plan of action.* All parties involved should come to consensus, not only on the solution, but also on the course of action that will lead to the solution. If children are not satisfied with the plan of action, they will be less inclined to follow through with the terms of the agreement.
- *State exact details of the agreement.* Children should have a clear understanding of the details of the agreement. How you go about doing this will depend on the age and developmental stage of each child. For younger and older children, you will need to use language and/or terms that can be clearly understood. After stating the details, make sure that the children understand what is expected of them. Have them repeat back to you the basics of the agreement to see if they have grasped the concepts.

Step 6: Reinforcing the Problem-Solving Process

- *Praise children for agreeing on a solution.* Compliment the children for their ideas. Let them know that you are proud of them for being willing and able to work toward a solution to their problem.
- *Process is as important as arriving at the solution.* In working through conflict with children, you are not only helping children resolve an immediate conflict, but you are also teaching them a process that can be applied in future settings. Initially, the process may not run as smoothly as you would like; however, be patient and



children will soon learn that following these simple steps actually work.

Step 7: Follow Through

- *Help children carry out the terms of the agreement.* Resolving conflict with others can be extremely difficult, even for adults. Therefore, children shouldn't be expected to go through the process without mistakes. You will need to work with children to help them fulfill their commitments to a peaceful solution.
- *Remind children of the terms.* Frequent verbal reminders will be necessary, especially for younger children who have virtually no experience in how to resolve conflicts with their peers.

Step 8: Announce the Conflict is Over

- *Let children know that the conflict has been resolved.* Children need to know that when they follow through with their agreements and the conflict is successfully resolved, the incident is over. Encourage the children to learn from the experience of correctly handling the situation; however, don't allow them to dwell on the past.

Teaching these simple steps will help children resolve conflicts with their peers and ultimately equip them with the skills they need to effectively come up with solutions on their own. As a child care provider, you are laying a foundation for peaceful conflict resolution that will enhance the children's ability to build strong relationships both now and in the future.

Dr. Stephen Green is an Assistant Professor and Child Development Specialist with Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas A&M System. His areas of speciality include child development, early childhood education, and father-child relationships.

Jonathan Thomas is an undergraduate student in the Department of Sociology at Texas A&M University.

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Web Resources on Helping Children Resolve Conflict

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