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How children can learn to resolve conflict

Conflict is normal

Conflict is a normal part of children’s lives. Having different needs or wants, or wanting the same thing when only one is available, can easily lead children into conflict with one another. “She won’t let me play,” “He took my ...”, “Tom’s being mean!” are complaints that parents, carers and teaching staff often hear when children get into conflict and are unable to resolve it. Common ways that children respond to conflict include arguing and physical aggression, as well as more passive responses such as backing off and avoiding one another.

When conflict is poorly managed it has a negative impact on children’s relationships, on their self-esteem and on their learning. However, teaching children the skills for resolving conflict can help significantly. By learning to manage conflict effectively children’s skills for getting along with others can be improved. Children are much happier, have better friendships and learn better at school when they know how to manage conflict well.

Different ways of responding to conflict

Since children have different needs and preferences, experiencing conflict with others is unavoidable. Many children (and adults) think of conflict as a competition that can only be decided by having a winner and a loser. The problem with thinking about conflict in this way is that it promotes win-lose behaviour: children who want to win try to dominate the other person; children who think they can’t win try to avoid the conflict. This does not result in effective conflict resolution.



Win-lose approaches to conflict

Children may try to get their way in a conflict by using force. Some children give in to try to stop the conflict, while others try to avoid the situation altogether. These different styles are shown below.

Conflict style	Animal example	Child's behaviour
Force	Shark, bull, lion	Argues, yells, debates, threatens, uses logic to impose own view.
Give in	Jelly fish, teddy bear	Prevents fights, tries to make others happy.
Avoid	Ostrich, turtle	Thinks or says: "I don't want conflict." Distracts, talks about something else, leaves the room or the relationship.

Sometimes these approaches appear to work in the short term, but they create other sets of problems. When children use force to win in a conflict it creates resentment and fear in others. Children who 'win' using this approach may develop a pattern of dominating and bullying others to get what they want. Children who tend to give in or avoid conflict may lack both confidence and skills for appropriate assertive behaviour. They are more likely to be dominated or bullied by others and may feel anxious and negative about themselves.

It is possible instead to respond to conflict in positive ways that seek a fair outcome. Instead of being seen as a win-lose competition conflict is seen as an opportunity to build healthier and more respectful relationships through understanding the perspectives of others.

Win-some lose-some: Using compromise to resolve conflict

Adults have a significant impact on how children deal with conflict. Often adults encourage children to deal with conflict by compromising. Compromising means that no-one wins or loses outright. Each person gets some of what they want and also gives up some of what they want.

Many children learn how to compromise as they grow and find ways to negotiate friendships. It is common around the middle of primary school for children to become very concerned with fairness and with rules as a way of ensuring fairness. This may correspond with an approach to resolving conflict that is based on compromise.

Conflict style	Animal example	Child's behaviour
Compromise	Fox	I give a bit and expect you to give a bit too.

Win-win: Using cooperation to resolve conflict

Using a win-win approach means finding out more about the problem and looking together for creative solutions so that everyone can get what they want.

Conflict style	Animal example	Child's behaviour
Sort out the problem (Win wisely)	Owl	Discover ways of helping everyone in the conflict to get what they want.

When introducing younger children to the different ways that conflicts can be handled, talking about the ways the animals included as examples above might deal with conflict can help children's understanding. It introduces an element of fun and enjoyment.

Skills required for effective conflict resolution

Effective conflict resolution requires children to apply a combination of well developed social and emotional skills. These include skills for managing feelings, understanding others, communicating effectively and making decisions. Children need guidance and 'coaching' to learn these skills.

Learning to use all the skills effectively in combination takes practice and maturity. However, with guidance children can begin to use a win-win model and gradually develop their abilities to resolve conflicts independently.

Skill:	What to encourage children to learn:
• Manage strong emotions	• Use strategies to control strong feelings
• Verbally express own thoughts and feelings	• Identify and communicate thoughts and feelings
• Identify the problem and express own needs	• Talk about their own wants/needs/fears/concerns without demanding an immediate solution
• Understand the other person's perspective	• Listen to what the other person wants/needs • Understand the other person's fears/concerns • Understand without having to agree • Respond sensitively and appropriately
• Generate a number of solutions to the problem	• Think of a variety of options • Try to include the needs and concerns of everyone involved
• Negotiate a win-win solution	• Be flexible • Be open minded • Look after own needs (be assertive)

Guiding children through the steps of conflict resolution

Steps and suggestions for conflict resolution

1. Set the stage for WIN-WIN outcomes

Conflict arises when people have different needs or views of a situation. Make it clear that you are going to help the children listen to each other's point of view and look for ways to solve the problem that everyone can agree to.

- *Ask:* What's the problem here? Be sure to get both sides of the story – e.g.: "He won't let me have a turn" from one child, and "I only just started and it's my game," from another.
- *Say:* I'm sure if we talk this through we'll be able to sort it out so that everyone is happy.

2. Have children state their own needs and concerns

The aim is to find out how each child sees the problem. Help children identify and communicate their needs and concerns without judging or blaming.

- *Ask:* What do you want or need? What are you most concerned about?

3. Help children listen to the other person and understand their needs and concerns

In the heat of conflict it is difficult to understand that the other person has feelings and needs too. Listening to the other person helps to reduce the conflict and allows children to think of the problem as something they can solve together.

- *Ask:* So you want to have a turn at this game now because it's nearly time to go home? And you want to keep playing to see if you can get to the next level?
- *Show children that you understand both points of view:* I can understand why you want to get your turn. I can see why you don't want to stop now.

4. Help children think of different ways to solve the problem

Often children who get into conflict can only think of one solution. Getting them to think of creative ways for solving the conflict encourages them to come up with new solutions that no-one thought of before. Ask them to let the ideas flow and think of as many options as they can, without judging any of them.

- *Encourage:* Let's think of at least 3 things we could do to solve this problem.

5. Build win-win solutions

Help children sort through the list of options you have come up with together and choose those that appear to meet everybody's needs. Sometimes a combination of the options they have thought of will work best. Together, you can help them build a solution that everyone agrees to.

- *Ask:* Which solution do you think can work? Which option can we make work together?

6. Put the solution into action and see how it works

Make sure that children understand what they have agreed to and what this means in practice.

- *Say:* Okay, so this is what we've agreed. Tom, you're going to show Wendy how to play the game, then Wendy, you're going to have a try, and I'm going to let you know when 15 minutes is up.

The information in this resource is based on Wertheim, E., Love, A., Peck, C. & Littlefield, L. (2006). *Skills for resolving conflict (2nd Edition)*. Melbourne: Eruditions Publishing.

Further ideas for helping children learn skills for conflict resolution are provided in the accompanying materials:

- *Learning to resolve conflict*
- *Helping children resolve conflict – Suggestions for parents and carers*
- *Helping children resolve conflict – Suggestions for teaching staff*

Additional ideas for helping children learn to understand others are provided in the accompanying information sheet:

- *Learning to value others*

General principles for helping children resolve conflict

The ways that adults respond to children's conflicts have powerful effects on children's behaviour and skill development. Until they have developed their own skills for managing conflict effectively most children will need very specific adult guidance to help them reach a good resolution. Parents, carers and teaching staff can help children to see conflict as a shared problem that can be solved by understanding both points of view and finding a solution that everyone is happy with.

- **Mediate and coach**

When adults impose a solution on children it may solve the conflict in the short term, but it can leave children feeling that their wishes have not been taken into account. Coaching children through the conflict resolution steps helps them feel involved. It shows them how effective conflict resolution can work so that they can start to build their own skills.

- **Listen to all sides without judging**

To learn the skills for effective conflict resolution children need to be able to acknowledge their own point of view and listen to others' views without fearing that they will be blamed or judged. Being heard encourages children to hear and understand what others have to say and how they feel.

- **Support children to work through difficult feelings**

Conflict often generates difficult feelings such as anger or anxiety. Difficult feelings get in the way of being able to think through conflicts fairly and reasonably. Acknowledge children's difficult feelings and help them to manage them. It may be necessary to help children calm down before trying to resolve the conflict.

Remember:

- Praise children for finding a solution and carrying it out
- If an agreed solution doesn't work out the first time, go through the steps again to find a different solution

For further information on helping children resolve conflict look for the accompanying KidsMatter list *Resolving conflict – Other resources*.

Further information on KidsMatter is available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



This resource is part of the KidsMatter trial. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au