Tip Sheet: Conflict Resolution

Resolving Conflict Constructively and Respectfully

Conflict is a natural part of life brought on by different beliefs, experiences, and values. If not managed carefully, however, conflict can harm relationships. Here are seven steps adults can use to resolve conflicts, followed by five similar steps adults can use to help children resolve their differences.

1. **Treat the other person with respect.**
   Although respecting the other person during a conflict is challenging, you must try. Words of disrespect block communication and may create wounds that may never heal. Use your willpower to treat the other person as a person of worth and as an equal.

2. **Confront the problem.**
   Find a time and place to discuss the conflict with the other person. Choose a time when you aren’t arguing or angry. The place should be comfortable for both of you—away from either party’s "turf."

3. **Define the conflict.**
   - Describe the conflict in clear, concrete terms. Be specific when answering the *who, what, when, where*, and *why* questions.
   - Describe behaviors, feelings, consequences, and desired changes. Be specific and start sentences with *I*, not *you*.
   - Focus on behaviors or problems, not people.
   - Define the conflict as a problem for both of you to solve together, not a battle to be won.

4. **Communicate understanding.**
   - Listen to really understand the other person’s feelings, needs, and so forth.
   - Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
   - Step back and try to imagine how the other person sees things.
   - Explain how you see the problem after you have talked about it. Discuss any changes you have made in the way you see things or how you feel.

5. **Explore alternative solutions.**
   - Take turns offering alternative solutions. List them all.
   - Be nonjudgmental of others’ ideas.
   - Examine the consequences of each solution.
   - Think and talk positively.
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6. Agree on the most workable solution.
   - Agree to a solution you both understand and can live with.
   - Work to find a win-win solution.
   - Be committed to resolving the conflict.

7. Evaluate after time.
   Work out a way to check on how well the solution is working. Adjust the resolution when necessary.

Teaching Children to Resolve Conflict

Many parents feel discouraged when their children bicker or resist requests made of them. How do they teach children to cooperate and resolve conflict? If you want children to stop fighting, you must teach them new skills for resolving conflict. They need to learn problem-solving skills and develop avenues for generating socially acceptable alternatives for getting what they want.

Research has shown that a child's ability to get what he or she wants in an acceptable manner is directly related to the number of solutions or alternatives the child can think of in a situation. A child who can think of five ways to get what he or she wants will generally display more socially acceptable behavior than the child who can think of only one or two ways. Following are some general steps in teaching problem-solving skills to children.

1. Get the facts and the feelings.
   When children are upset, fighting, angry, or hurt, first find out the details. When questions such as "What happened?" are asked calmly and nonjudgmentally, children usually calm down and answer them. Spend some time focusing on feelings. Children see things primarily from their own perspectives. They may be completely unaware of how their behavior affects other people, except when another person interferes with their needs. To negotiate fair solutions, children need to know how others feel.

2. Help children see the goal.
   Generating ideas for solutions is much easier for children when they have a clear goal. Help children define the problem in terms of what both children want to happen: for example, "What can you do so you have room to play with blocks and Janine has room to drive her truck?" When the problem is phrased this way, children get the idea that the needs of both are important.

3. Generate alternatives.
   To help children resolve conflict, adults can help them stay focused on the problem. Adults can also act as a "blackboard." When children suggest alternatives, adults can repeat the ideas and
then ask them what else could be done. Resist the temptation to suggest ideas, as most children might assume their own thoughts are not good enough. If a child needs new ideas, suggest them later, or ask the child to imagine how someone else he or she knows might handle the situation.

4. Evaluate consequences.
After the children have generated all the ideas they can, evaluate the consequences. Ask them, "What might happen if you...?" or, "How might Matt feel if you...?" Resist the temptation to judge the ideas. Adults will not always be around to tell a child that his or her idea is not good and to suggest another. In the long run, adults are more helpful by encouraging children to evaluate ideas themselves and see why they are unacceptable.

5. Ask for a decision.
When the children have completed thinking of and evaluating ideas, make a plan. Restate the problem, summarize the ideas, and let the children decide which idea they will try. If they choose an alternative you think will not work, be sure they know what they should do next.

The process of teaching problem solving often seems tedious, and parents may be tempted to just tell a child what to do. That does not allow children to gain the experience of thinking of what to do for themselves.