

Conflict Resolution with Young Children

Eleni McDermott 2008

Conflict is a normal, healthy part of young children's development. For preschooler's learning to socialize can be the beginning of something new and exciting. Socializing however, requires children to learn many new skills especially if they are to enjoy the experience of playing and having fun with others.

Some of the many skills necessary for positive social interaction are:

1. The ability to respect the rights of others.

Property Rights - not taking what someone else owns or is using.

Space Rights - not moving into someone else's space unless invited or accepted.

Safety Rights- the right to feel safe both emotionally and physically and not endangering someone else by our actions.

2. The ability to control expressions of anger.

Anger is a valid emotion and should not be suppressed. It is however, important that the expression of anger doesn't hurt anyone else or damage property. Young children need to be supported, their anger acknowledged and to be given legitimate outlet for their anger, e.g. punching bag, dramatic play props, role play scenarios, puppets etc and teaching children to express their feelings of anger, by using their words

3. The ability to assert themselves in a socially acceptable manner.

If children can learn to assert themselves, they will be more confident to take some control of situations. For example; *please don't push me...I don't like it...and.....you can have this toy when I'm finished with it etc*

4. The ability to share ones own ideas and listen to those of others.

Learning that each person has a useful contribution to make, takes time but role modeling this behavior can make a big difference. Developing effective listening skills and taking time to both listen to others and to make contributions are vital ingredients in solving conflicts..

Developmental Milestones

Children develop at their own pace in all areas; socially, cognitively, emotionally and physically. It is not unusual for a child to be 'ahead' in one area of development and lag a little in another. Also a child will not necessarily have social development that matches their chronological age. Conforming to routines, understanding the rules of sharing and being willing to accept them, varies with the age of the child and his/her temperament. Non compliance is not only inevitable but healthy!

What about the child who is often 'in trouble' with conflict situations?

Some children find it difficult to play harmoniously with other children. They seem to be forever in the midst of conflict to the point where it is very easy for adults to begin to assume that a particular child is at fault. It is harmful for children to feel that they are always regarded as *trouble makers* e.g. "oh no....not Lily again- always in the middle of trouble."

Careful observation however, often reveals that other children quickly learn that it is worth taunting the *naughty* child because that child tends to get the blame from adults. This kind of situation makes mediating rather than judging, all the more important. When mediating, the adult treats both children equally and this

ensures that the child who is often in the trouble spot doesn't develop a feeling of being treated unfairly.

When children know that the adult will want to hear both sides of the conflict, those who instigate conflict with taunting behavior are put in the position of needing to admit to their part in the conflict and are therefore, learning to be more responsible for their own actions.

Requiring children to talk about the conflict situation also seems to help children who are prone to telling tales. Expecting both the tale teller and the other children concerned to each have their say while the others listen, seems to help the teller to become more discriminating about what really needs to be told.

Strategies to help

1. Adults need to remember that learning socially acceptable behavior takes time- sometimes a long time and one can often feel like a running record! Be patient, positive, supportive and consistent.
2. When adults work as mediators most conflict between children becomes valuable learning experiences. Listen to both sides and support children to resolve their own conflicts by negotiating
3. Always be interested when the child gains your attention and try not to comment until the story is finished.
4. It is important to validate children's attempts to cope with new situations such as sharing for example; "Thank you for listening to Hugo and working on this problem together".
5. Stay respectful at all times. Your tone of voice and non verbal behavior should indicate that you respect the child even when her/his behavior is not socially acceptable.
6. Teach children to use the correct words in order to avoid conflicts. For example "can I have that toy when you have finished?" or "I don't like you pulling me...please stop."
7. Some children don't feel sorry if they have done the wrong thing, so having them say sorry has very little value other than satisfying the adult. Better to help a child understand that his/her actions caused pain or distress to another child.

Remember, we should give children enough time to resolve their own conflicts before we step in, as the aim in managing conflict resolution is self regulation which means gaining control of their body and managing powerful emotions. Don't be afraid to step back and say "you solve the problem" if children have the verbal skills to do that. **By supporting children to manage their own conflicts, we are in turn empowering a future generation to reach peaceful non-violent solutions to problems.** Now wouldn't that be the kind of world we would all want to live in?

Happy Parenting!

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