

Common Mistakes When Resolving Conflict with Children - and Solutions!

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1. **Mistake:** Facilitating conflict between two children when one or both children have a “flipped lid” (upset and operating from “fight or flight” in the mid-brain vs. the “problem solving” part of the brain, or pre-frontal cortex).

Solution: Use a “Positive Time-Out” area that is created by the children so that children have a place to cool down and re-engage the part of their brain that solves problems.

2. **Mistake:** Relying only on the conflict resolution model to solve problems. Adults resolve conflict in many different ways. In addition to speaking directly to someone about our problem we also make choices to “let it go”, spend time with other friends, discuss the problem with a friend, etc. Children need to learn many ways to solve problems.

Solution: Develop a “Wheel of Choice” with your students. Have a discussion with them about common problems that they run into during the school day. Then brainstorm solution to those common problems. Condense the list into 4-6 solutions for Early Childhood classrooms and 6-8 solutions for Elementary classrooms. On a circle shaped piece of card stock, large enough for the children to read, divide the circle into “pie slices” where each slice represents a solution. Write the students’ condensed solutions on each slice (draw pictures for children who do not read yet). Fix the wheel to a piece of poster board with a brad through the center of the wheel. Role-play with the children how to choose a solution from the “Wheel of Choice”.

Solutions on the “Wheel of Choice” should include:

- Let it go (vs. “ignore it”)
- Class meeting
- Talk directly to the person (“Peace Process” or conflict resolution process)

3. **Mistake:** Not teaching effective communication skills. Children often use language that either is blaming, or insinuates blame. This causes the person receiving the message to become defensive. When one of the children is defensive they are far less likely to take responsibility for their part in the problem, and without both parties taking responsibility a problem will almost never get solved!

Solution: Teach “I” language as early as 4 years old, and teach children to ask for what they need to resolve the problem. Consider this model:

”I feel _____, because/when _____. I wish/want_____.”

It might sound like this: *I felt embarrassed when you teased me about my dress. I wish that you would please use kind words.”*

4. **Mistake:** Not teaching effective listening skills. One of the biggest complaints that children have about the conflict resolution process is that the other child doesn’t listen to them. Learning to listen and how to show the other person that you are listening are important life skills, and are

critical to open communication when resolving conflict. Some children have naturally good listening skills, but most children need to learn these important grace and courtesy skills.

Solution: Teach reflective listening skills, and the importance of body language to children as early as 4 ½. Here is a reflective listening model:

“So, you feel _____, because/when _____, and you wish/want_____.”

It might sound like this: *So, you felt embarrassed when I teased you about your dress and you really want me to be kind to you.*

To avoid becoming rote and then meaningless, as children get older have them role-play ways to listen reflectively using their own words vs. relying on the model.

Making children aware of the impact of body language and non-verbal communication is also critical to open and effective communication and problem solving:

- Eye contact
- Arms folded
- Facial expressions
- Posture
- Space
- Tone

5. **Mistake:** Using only 1-on-1 conflict resolution. Social conflicts in the classroom often have more than two participants, especially at the elementary levels. Social conflicts also may be affecting other children even though the conflict is only between two children. When those who either participated in the conflict, or whom were affected by the conflict are not involved, the problem may only appear to be resolved and will often manifest later with greater intensity or complexity.

Solution: Use the class meeting as an avenue for children to get help from one another to resolve conflict. In order for this to be effective the meeting must be a safe place for children to open, honest and take responsibility without the fear of punishment or consequences. Here are some suggestions to create that climate in the class meeting:

- Always start with “compliments and appreciations”
- Insure that consequences are not used in solving problems in the class meeting – the guidelines for all solutions should be – **R**easonable, **R**esponsible, **R**elated and **R**espectful.
- When resolving conflict in the class meeting, have the children speak directly to each other, and use “I” language.
- Allow all children involved in the conflict to share their feelings before getting feedback from the group.
- Encourage the students who were involved in the problem to take responsibility for what they see as their part in the problem, reminding them that the class is there to help solve problems, and that no one gets in trouble at the class meeting.

- Remind students who were not involved in the conflict to validate all perceptions (if they have actually felt or acted in a similar way), and model this skill.
- Before brainstorming solutions, ask the participants in the problem if they would like solutions from the group. “No” is an acceptable answer.
- Insure that those involved in the conflict choose their own solutions (not someone else’s).