

TEACHING CHILDREN TO NEGOTIATE CONFLICT

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If you pick up a business or management publication today, it is difficult to do so without running into an article written about the need by organizations for employees to have the social and emotional skills needed to successfully navigate a variety of interpersonal circumstance with dignity, respect and effective communication. What many of these articles focus on is the emotional competence needed to attain one's own goals, while simultaneously acknowledging and helping others meet their needs. To keep it simple, they are referring to successful negotiation of conflict, inherent in most all human relationships. As someone who works with children each day, what immediately comes to mind as I read these articles, is the question: Why aren't these skills being taught to children when they are in their sensitive period for developing their social skills? Wouldn't it be much easier?

Learning to negotiate conflict is a lifelong journey. It begins in childhood, especially as the children near age 5 and peer relations take on greater importance. Children in their early elementary years are not only learning how to read, understand math concepts and communicate through writing, they are also in a sensitive developmental period for developing lifelong social skills. You may remember arguing with your peers at school or your siblings about what is fair and not fair, or about who gets to play who. This was not just a difficult stage in life, but a natural developmental phase where social and communications skills are being developed and children begin to learn how to navigate conflicting needs and goals.

Without tutelage and support in navigating and negotiating conflict young people will find themselves in social situations where the focus is on social survival rather than on learning important life lessons. This is where victims and bullies are born, and dysfunctional coping skills begin to crop up, like withdrawal, manipulation, gossip, creation of unnecessary conflict, etc.

Conversely, if adults intervene too much, and seek to fix and rescue children from the challenges of conflict, rather than teach and support, children miss important opportunities to learn from the messiness of interpersonal difficulties. Over protecting, while coming from the best of intentions, postpones the lessons until the children are older, and at this point the consequences of making mistakes are much higher. This again, leads to the development of dysfunctional coping skills and can be the cause of much consternation and confusion.

How then can we help children learn to manage conflict and negotiate difficult interpersonal situations, like that of quitting a job or leaving a relationship? The answer, actually, isn't so complicated. It begins with embracing the fact that human relationships are messy affairs, and that children are capable of learning how to negotiate conflict and competing needs as early as age 4 or 5. (If your children are older, don't worry, it's never too late to start.) Then, it's just a matter of teaching children some of the practical skills that make resolving conflict successful. Once these skills are learned, children then begin to develop the capacity to see another's point of view, advocate for their own needs, disagree with another without criticism or judgment, develop their own point of view, and set clear and appropriate boundaries.

Here is a simple model that you can teach your children and use with them:

1. Teach your child to take time to cool off. Encourage them to find their own space to calm down before deciding to resolve conflict with you or with a sibling or friend. Adults can model this as well. If you are angry or upset, let your child know that you need to take some time to calm down before you resolve the problem so that you can do it effectively and respectfully.
2. Let it go or talk it out? After cooling down, check in with your child, ask them if the issue is something they want to resolve through talking or if it's something they would like to let go. If they truly would like to let it go, then they can move on (this is an important life skill too!).
3. Resolve the conflict (ages 6 and older):
 - a. Child shares how he or she feels and listens to how the other person feels.
 - b. Each person involved takes responsibility for what they did to contribute to the problem, and what they are willing to do differently
 - c. Brainstorm ideas or solutions to fix the problem or prevent it from happening again
 - d. Choose a mutually acceptable solution

Resolve the conflict (ages 4 and 5)

- a. Child shares what they didn't like, and what they want instead. "I didn't like it when you took my car. I wish you would give it back."
- b. Other child or adult responds. "I can do that."
- c. Other child or adult shares what they didn't like (if necessary) and what they want instead.
- d. Child responds (if necessary).

While this model is very simple, the results of teaching children to negotiate conflict can be profound. Children begin to learn that others have needs and wants, which are important. They also learn to identify their own needs in situations, how to be assertive and respectful, and to communicate effectively. As well, when negotiating conflict respectfully, children learn to cope with uncomfortable situations in a direct and open manner, where appropriate boundaries can be set, and everyone's needs are considered. How might a child who has been raised with these skills navigate leaving a job, making a difficult transition or ending a romantic relationship where the stakes are far greater than losing a turn on a swing?