Coaching Children in Handling Everyday Conflicts

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“Camp counselor, he won’t play with me.”
“Ian, she cut in line.”
“Dara, he took my ball.”

Such conflicts are familiar in school or camp life. For years, resolving such conflicts for children filled my days until I realized that the children learned nothing about resolving their own conflicts—or preventing conflicts from happening in the first place.

Finally, I began teaching child-to-child conflict resolution protocols. Once children learn these protocols, pairs or small groups can independently explain their upsets to each other, come up with reasonable resolutions, and follow through with changes in their behavior. But before children can learn to use any protocol independently, they need a firm grasp of some basic social skills:

- Cooling off when upset
- Speaking directly to each other

- -Speaking assertively, honestly, and kindly
- -Listening carefully to others and accurately -
- paraphrasing their words
  -Proposing solutions and agreeing on a solution to try

You can teach these skills intentionally, whether or not you plan to move on to independent student-to-student conflict resolution. I begin during the first weeks of school. The teaching does take time, but so does resolving the children's conflicts for them. And teaching basic skills yields powerful benefits: a more peaceable environment and a firm foundation on which the children can build further conflict-resolution learning in later grades.

My techniques for teaching the five skills always included whole-class discussions. Some of the richest of these were explorations of literature in which characters experience conflict. I also used teachable moments —moments when a conflict had just erupted. Because this last technique may be less familiar to you, it's the one I'd like to tell you more about.

Using the teachable moment

Beginning with the first days together, children have predictable conflicts about sharing materials, how they think each other should be acting, or deciding whom to play with. These are times when you can teach the basic skills by guiding the children in navigating a difficult interpersonal moment. You'll send a strong message about how disagreements will be handled at camp. You'll also give children opportunities to experience themselves as problem-solvers in situations that really matter to them.

A classic teachable moment arose on a beautiful fall day one year when I was working with 7 year olds. The field was full of kids running, swinging, climbing, and tossing balls. Emily came running over to me, saying, "Teacher, Joanne wouldn't let me play."

Emily and I found Joanne, and the three of us sat down together on a bench to talk, Emily and Joanne side by side. In the seven-step conversation that followed, I introduced the basic skills and gave both girls opportunities to practice as we worked together on solving their problem.(My comments to you are in italics.)

1. The children cool off.

Skill: Cooling off when upset

“OK,” I said. “Before we begin to resolve this conflict, I want you both to take a couple of deep breaths to cool off. I’ll take some too, so that I’m calm and ready to help you.”

Research shows that stress-induced changes in our bodies impede logical thinking and increase aggression. Taking steps to calm ourselves allows us to do the clear thinking and careful listening needed for peacefully resolving interpersonal problems.

2. The first child (aggrieved party) states the issue.

Skills: Speaking assertively, honestly, and kindly; Speaking directly to each other

Once the children had taken some breaths and relaxed a little, I said, “Emily, tell Joanne what you told me. Make sure you look at her.” Instead, Emily looked at me and started to blurt, “She wouldn’t let me play!”

Immediately, I let the children know this was not going to be business as usual: I wasn’t going to resolve their conflict for them. Instead, they were going to talk to each other.

“Emily, look at Joanne and tell her why you’re upset,” I said. Emily looked at her classmate but didn’t speak. She needed a sentence starter. “You can start with ‘Joanne, when . . .’” I said. To the other child, I said, “Joanne, it’s your job to listen carefully to Emily.”

“Joanne, you wouldn’t let me play, and I wanted to,” said Emily.

Children experienced with child-to-child conflict resolution use “I-statements” to say why they’re upset: “I felt bad when you said I couldn’t play with you.” By focusing on her own feelings, the upset child gives her partner space to listen calmly and openly, without feeling attacked or defensive. But when you’re guiding children who are just learning the basic skills, “you-statements” are acceptable.

3. The second child listens and paraphrases what they heard.

Skills: Listening and paraphrasing; Speaking directly to each other

Joanne was defensive, ready to explain how she was in the right. “It wasn’t . . .”

Right away I stopped her. “Joanne, first let Emily know that you understood her by telling her what you heard. You might begin by saying, ‘I heard you say that . . .'”

This is the magical step. Often we’re so focused on our own needs or hurts that we don’t truly listen to the other person. When required to paraphrase what their partner said, children listen, and that listening helps move them toward understanding their partner’s point of view. It also helps the partner feel heard. Younger students might find simply echoing their partner’s words easier than paraphrasing.

“But I was just . . . ,” Joanne persisted. I stopped her again.

“You don’t have to agree with Emily. Right now you just need to let her know you listened by telling what you heard.”

Joanne hesitated, so I said, “Emily, tell Joanne again what you said.” Emily repeated her statement, which Joanne heard this time.

Often children can’t state their understanding because rather than listening carefully, they were busy preparing their defense. Sometimes they need to have their partner repeat what he or she said.

“I heard you say that you wanted to play, and I didn’t let you,” Joanne said.

4. The second child states his or her point of view.

Skills: Speaking assertively, honestly, and kindly; Speaking directly to each other

“Joanne, now it’s your turn to tell Emily your point of view about what happened,” I said. “Emily, you’re going to listen carefully.”

This experience shows children that in such conversations, they’ll have an opportunity to speak. This helps them wait their turn and focus on listening.

“I’d already planned to play with Valeria,” Joanne said eagerly. “We didn’t see each other all summer, and I wanted to be alone with her.”

5. The first child listens and paraphrases what he or she heard.

Skills: Listening and paraphrasing; Speaking directly to each other

“Emily, it’s your job now to tell Joanne what you heard her say. Later you’ll get a chance to say whether you agree with her.”

“But it’s not fair . . .” Emily interjected.

Clearly, Emily also needed help suspending the urge to argue her case and instead paraphrasing so her partner feels heard.

“Remember, Emily, right now you’re letting Joanne know that you understood her, just what you understood her to say,” I coached.

“You and Valeria wanted to play alone together,” Emily stated simply.

“Emily, now check with Joanne to make sure that you heard her accurately.” Emily looked at Joanne, and Joanne nodded.

6. The process continues until both children feel they have been fully heard.

Skills: Speaking assertively, honestly, and kindly; Speaking directly to each other; Listening and paraphrasing

“Joanne, do you have anything more to add?” I asked. Joanne shook her head.

“Emily, how about you?” Emily also shook her head “no.”

It’s important to model patience and thoroughness in stating all the reasons for a conflict. Unspoken grievances will fester and result in more conflict, sooner or later.

7. The children reach a solution.

Skill: Proposing solutions and agreeing on a solution to try

“Emily, do you have any ideas about what you and Joanne might do to solve this problem?” I asked.

“We could play together tomorrow,” Emily suggested.

“Joanne, do you have any ideas?”

“Emily’s idea is okay with me,” Joanne said.

It’s important for children to learn to listen respectfully to each other’s ideas for solutions. If either child had reacted disdainfully to her partner’s idea, I would have immediately redirected her to state her objection in a positive, helpful way.

The two girls ran off to enjoy the rest of their free play. The next day I watched to make sure they followed through on their agreement. They did, playing happily with each other.

Agreeing on a plan is one thing; actually following through is another. When children are just learning to resolve interpersonal problems, they especially need your supportive check-in to make sure the agreed-upon solution is working for both of them. Within a few days after coaching, you can simply ask each of them, "How's that plan going?" Sometimes, as in this example, all you need to do is notice if their behavior toward one another has changed.

Teachable moments turn into lifelong skills

When we patiently guide children in using basic problem-solving skills when conflict erupts, we get them back on track so they can continue their academic and social learning. But we also accomplish much more than that. We give children a chance to experience themselves as problem-solvers, able to take responsibility for dealing directly with one another when they're upset. We nurture in them kindness, consideration of others, respectful assertion of their needs, and cooperation. These are habits and skills that will serve them well for a lifetime.

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This article was slightly updated with language for camp, rather than school.