

A Three-Step Approach to Help Children Navigate Conflict

Resources / Publications / Teaching Young Children / Fall 2023 / A Three-Step Approach to Help Children Navigate Conflict

KYLA MCROY, HOPE K. GERDE, LAURIE LINSKOTT

It is work time in the Riverbend Room, and Jamaya and Ian are playing in the block area. Ian picks up a block from the floor beside him, but Jamaya shrieks and reaches to grab it. Ian jerks it away. Both children begin to shout.

The teacher, Ms. Williams, runs over. This is the third time this week that disagreements between Jamaya and Ian have erupted into a shouting match, and Ms. Williams is running out of ideas to calm these situations. The rest of the class looks on as she approaches the two.

Effective teachers create positive learning environments by helping children learn to regulate their behavior and emotions. Yet even with well-established behavioral expectations (“We are kind”; “We touch books gently”), young children often continue to engage in unsafe behavior and experience conflicts. Many teachers, such as Ms. Williams, are unsure how to help them resolve these situations.

This article presents a three-step approach to help children develop the self-regulation and language skills necessary to address common behavior challenges and social conflicts. It was developed by researchers and educators at Michigan State University’s teacher preparation program.

The Three-Step Approach to Addressing Conflict

A child's self-regulation is influenced by developmental processes that occur emotionally, cognitively, and linguistically. Because these skills develop throughout childhood, preschoolers (and even older children) may find it difficult to manage their behaviors and use appropriate strategies to effectively communicate during conflict.

Early childhood educators play an essential role in the development of these skills. When teachers target self-regulation and language during classroom interactions and conflicts, children become more capable of using strategies to interact with peers and solve problems appropriately. By following the steps below, teachers can effectively support children's self-regulation and language development while addressing unsafe, destructive, or conflict-related behaviors in the classroom.

Step One: State the Behavior and Help Identify Emotions

Just as teachers can acknowledge children's positive behaviors in the classroom, they can also describe behavior that is not appropriate. Clearly and briefly describing children's behavior draws their attention to their actions and gives them the language they need for future interactions. For example, if a child is shoveling sand onto the floor at the sensory area, a teacher might say, "Micah, you are pouring sand out of the sensory table onto the floor." This makes the child aware of their behavior and sets the stage for the teacher to explain and address it (steps two and three).

This first step is also an excellent opportunity for teachers to use emotion vocabulary to help children understand and label feelings that might be related to their behavior. When teachers acknowledge children's feelings, they help children feel heard. They also set the stage for a compassionate discussion rather than a power struggle.

For example, a 3-year-old struggling to balance blocks on his tower might yell, causing a teacher to kneel beside him and say, "You are yelling. It sounds like you are angry." Or a child might appear upset about accidentally ripping their easel paper while painting, to which the teacher can respond, "You are kicking the easel. I wonder if you are frustrated?"

A feelings chart is a valuable resource that can help children label and discuss emotions. The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations offers an example at challengingbehavior.org/docs/FeelingFaces_chart_template.pdf.

Step Two: Explain the Behavior and Its Implications

After teachers have drawn a child's attention to their behavior and helped them identify their emotions, they can explain why the behavior may be inappropriate. This helps the child begin to recognize cause and effect, which supports their future ability to use reasoning to regulate their behavior without teacher support.

Step two is a great opportunity for teachers to refer back to the behavioral expectations they've already established with children. Providing children with a reason that reflects classroom rules and/or speaks to children's personal interests can help motivate them to adjust their behavior.

For example, if a child is dumping toy cars on the floor, the teacher could say, "You are dumping the cars all over the floor. Children may step on the cars and fall and hurt themselves, or their feet might break the cars, so we can't use them anymore." If a child tears a book, the teacher could say, "You tore this book. We won't be able to read it. Remember that one of our classroom rules is to be gentle with our books."

Teachers can also take this opportunity to support children's language development by using rich vocabulary. For example, if a child is working on their picture as the class starts to transition, the teacher can say, "You are still *illustrating* the story you wrote. If you keep working on your *illustration* right now, you will miss free play time."

Step Three: Address the Behavior

Now that children are aware of their actions and the related implications, teachers can guide them by providing an alternative, appropriate behavior. In the following example, a child is attempting to use scissors to cut their clothing. Step three is underlined.

Teacher: (*gently stopping the child's hands*) You're using scissors to cut your shirt. You seem curious about how scissors work. Is that right?

Child: I'm cutting.

Teacher: Yes, you're cutting your shirt with scissors. The scissors may ruin your clothes or hurt you. Use the scissors to cut your construction paper, or choose another item from the art center like the felt strips. Which will you choose?

During this step, some children will benefit when teachers provide a solution ("Soil stays in the flowerbed."). Others will be able to choose from among a few replacement choices, especially if emotions are heightened and children struggle to engage in an expected behavior.

Effective teachers can stimulate children's language use during this step by helping them identify what to say. Depending on the child's language skills, teachers may need to

- provide the language for resolving a conflict ("Tiana, did you want to help Sam with the puzzle? You can say, 'Sam, can I help?' ")
- offer choices about what to say ("Do you want to ask Gayle to 'Please pass the water pitcher,' or do you want to ask Marco?")
- prompt children to think about what they could say independently ("Violet, what could you say to Akshay if you want to take a turn?")

Teachers can also help children brainstorm alternative behaviors or solutions by encouraging them to verbalize their current problem and think through the challenge. If children struggle to come up with their own solutions, teachers may provide additional support by saying, "I have an idea. Would you like to hear my idea?" After several iterations with teacher support, children will begin to address problems more independently.

The Three Steps in Action

Now let's return to the opening vignette and see these three steps in action.

As Ian and Jamaya argue over the blocks, Ms. Williams calmly approaches them. She begins at step one, saying, "Ian and Jamaya, you are yelling and trying to grab each other's blocks. You seem furious." She gently stops their hands. "I will hold onto this block while we find a solution."

Keeping the desired block where both children can see it, Ms. Williams proceeds to step two. "Your yelling hurts other children's ears and my ears, and you might hurt each other when you hit." With this statement, both children are reminded how their behavior might upset others and cause pain to themselves.

"How should we solve this problem?" Ms. Williams asks, moving to step three.

"We can use a timer," says Ian. Ms. Williams replies, "You're thinking you could use a timer to take turns using the block. What do you think, Jamaya?"

Jamaya frowns and says no. Ms. Williams nods and says, "Hmmm. It doesn't sound like that idea works for Jamaya. Jamaya, do you have a different idea?"

Jamaya points to another block in Ian's pile and says, "I want that one. I give you this one." Ms. Williams turns to Ian and says, "Ian, it sounds like Jamaya is willing to trade her block

—this one that I’m holding—for one of your blocks. Does that idea work for you?” Ian nods, and Ms. Williams says, “Okay, so Ian will take this block, and Jamaya will take that block. Did we solve the problem?” Both children agree and take their respective blocks. Ms. Williams adds, “We were respectful to each other when we solved that problem, just like our classroom rule says!”

Conclusion

By using the three-step approach to state the behavior, explain the implications of the behavior, and address the behavior, effective teachers support self-regulation and language development simultaneously. However, it’s important to understand that adopting this approach and making it second nature will take practice. Teachers should not expect to master the three-step approach overnight, but they can support the development of these skills by posting reminders and prompts around the classroom to refer to—especially in areas where conflicts tend to occur more often because of increased social interactions (like the block or dramatic play areas).

It’s also important to remember that certain situations may cause teachers to feel stressed or upset themselves. In these cases, they should take a moment to calm themselves before dealing with the conflict. This may require taking a couple of deep breaths and/or mentally reframing the conflict as an opportunity to engage children in developing self-regulatory and language skills. A supportive mantra, such as “The children are not giving me a hard time; they are having a hard time,” may help. Teachers can also work to view themselves as a mediator, or a wise but neutral guide whose purpose is to help each child on the path to self-regulation and effective communication.

This is an adaptation of an article that appeared in the Fall 2022 issue of *Young Children*. You can read the full article, which contains additional examples and resources,

at [NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/yc/fall2022/three-step-approach](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/fall2022/three-step-approach).

Photograph: © Getty Images

Copyright © 2023 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See permissions and reprints online at [NAEYC.org/resources/permissions](https://naeyc.org/resources/permissions).

Audience: *Administrator (director or principal), Teacher*

Age: *Preschool*

Topics: *Child Development, Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

KYLA MCROY

Kyla McRoy, MS, is a doctoral candidate in the department of Human Development and Family Studies at Michigan State University.

HOPE K. GERDE

Hope K. Gerde, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture at Texas A&M University.

LAURIE LINSOTT

Laurie Linscott, MA, is the director of the Child Development Laboratories at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

© National Association for the Education of Young Children

1401 H Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005 | (202)232-8777 | (800)424-2460 | info@naeyc.org