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## Conflict Resolution [Grades PreK-3]

Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education

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# Conflict Resolution

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## WHAT IS CONFLICT RESOLUTION?



Classroom conflict is inevitable among young children engaged in an active curriculum. Conflicts provide rich opportunities for children to be confronted with the perspective of others. Children's desire for good relationships with their friends motivates them to persist in solving problems. Engaging and supporting children in resolving their own conflicts fosters mutual respect in the classroom.

Learning to resolve conflict is an essential part of a democratic classroom. Children who are part of a classroom community where there is shared decision-making, development of classroom rules, voting to make decisions, and practice and coaching when learning to solve problems can learn to self-regulate when they see that adults believe in their abilities to do so. The goal is for children to have a personal conviction about basic values so that even when an adult is not present they will follow rules and expectations. Adult-child relationships are at the heart of this kind of classroom community.

Piaget described two kinds of conflict. **Inter-individual** conflict occurs between two or more individuals and involves a clash between the individuals' goals, behaviors, beliefs, knowledge, or expectations. **Intra-individual** conflict occurs within the individual and involves a contradiction between what a person knows or believes and what he or she experiences or observes.

Conflict plays a central role in the development of knowledge. Experiences of conflict prompt children to change how they think and feel. A child's efforts to resolve conflict lead to the construction of new understanding. Piaget stated that social interaction is necessary for the development of logic (Piaget, 1932/1960). Early childhood teachers who plan for the development of the socio-moral atmosphere in their classrooms enhance the interpersonal relationships of their students as well as provide for intellectual development.

## BEGINNING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- Provide an "alone-time" place for students to go when they need to cool down. Make sure this in no way feels like time out!
- Provide a place where students can go to work out a problem together when on-the-spot problem solving is not possible.
- Provide visual cues for students who are very young, just beginning to problem solve, or who need supplemental supports in order to be successful.
- Read books that focus on social-emotional topics and include them in the classroom library for students to read on their own.
- Use social stories for students who need more individualized instruction. Social stories can be written specifically for one child, can be written for the whole class, or can be found commercially or shared on social media.

## DISCIPLINE VS. GUIDANCE

Guidance goes beyond the traditional goal of classroom discipline, which enforces children's compliance to the teacher's will. Guidance involves creating a successful learning environment for every child in which each child can find a place to belong and learn (Gartrell, 2004).

Many teachers recognize that when discipline includes loss of face or privileges, the effects can be harmful. Children have difficulty improving their behavior when there are no opportunities to learn from the experience. Instead of being shamed into being good, they are likely to internalize the negative personal message that punishment carries (Gartrell, 1995). Classrooms where teachers value the relationships in the classroom and provide choices, empathy, co-created classroom rules, voting when making decisions, and coaching to learn conflict resolution skills, provide learners the opportunity to develop self-regulation.



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Misbehavior makes us think of punishment.	Mistaken behavior makes us think of guiding and educating.
<p>Misbehavior                      “This child is misbehaving in the center and needs some punishment to change the behavior.” But the consequence of punishment is that the child might respond with</p>	<p>Mistaken Behavior                      “This child is having some mistaken behavior in the center. I’m not sure he understands what is possible to figure out in this center. I wonder how I could</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Revenge (hitting out at the punishing adult)</b></li> <li>• <b>Retreat (running away from the punishing adult)</b></li> <li>• <b>Resentment (internalized anger that can break out later)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• arrange the classroom;</li> <li>• change how I introduce the experience</li> <li>• improve the experience so he understands what he can figure out in the center.</li> </ul>
<p>In this reaction, the adult:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>makes a moral judgment about behavior</b></li> <li>2. <b>makes another moral judgment about the child</b></li> <li>3. <b>tries to control the child rather than understand the behavior.</b></li> </ol>	<p><b>In this response, the adult:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. reasons why a child behaved in a certain way</li> <li>2. wonders what he/she could do differently to help the child understand</li> <li>3. is calling on the ability to be <b>understanding</b> and <b>patient</b></li> </ol>

## TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

### Building a classroom community

When early childhood teachers use their authority selectively and wisely, respect children’s feelings and ideas, and coach children to manage conflicts independently, then the classroom community begins to emerge (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Positive adult-child interactions begin with a teacher who understands that each one belongs. Children thrive when teachers observe and communicate carefully with children, are clear about expectations, and empower children to participate in decision-making. In democratic classrooms, class meetings are used to co-create rules and guidelines, children are coached in conflict resolution, stories and experiences are used to discuss moral dilemmas, and students who need a more comprehensive plan for behavior are recognized and planned for.

### Making rules with children

When children participate in rule-making in the classroom they begin to formulate ideas about the reason for rules, what rules might be needed to make their classroom work, and why rules are necessary to make a classroom a great place to learn and grow. Some teachers may choose to begin with a few simple classroom rules, stated positively: *Be safe- Listen- Be a friend- Use polite words*. Teachers who understand the value of co-created classroom rules may wait until there is a need for rules in a particular center before asking the children to participate in rulemaking. When three-year-olds were leaving books on the floor in the classroom library, walking on them, tearing book pages, and bending the covers, the teacher brought this problem to their attention at their morning meeting. They generated ideas for taking care of books, the teacher wrote their ideas on chart paper to be placed in the library, and children could refer to them when sharing books with peers or adults.

### Finding a “peace place”

The first principle of teaching in conflict situations states that teachers should “establish an expectation in the classroom that children will engage in conflict resolution” and provide a private place where students can go to work out conflicts. Some conflicts can be addressed on the spot. Others, however, require a quiet place with a list of steps posted on the wall, a social story, or some props for assisting with turn-taking. Children may need an adult to guide them during the learning process or when they are having difficulty negotiating the conflict on their own.



### Writing Social Stories

A social story is a strategy that can provide guidance and clarify expectations in situations that arise in a classroom. Social stories are often individualized for students who need additional supports to transition, engage in peer interactions, follow directions, or negotiate with peers during conflicts. The social story is written by the teacher and features the child as the main character immersed in a situation the child finds challenging. When the child is calm and relaxed, the story is read together enabling the child to mental rehearse the situation to positively respond to the challenge. A social story can be written with the entire class as the character so that ALL members of the class can benefit and so that they require less support from adults as they learn classroom expectations.

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## PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

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- Establish an expectation in the classroom that children will engage in conflict resolution and provide a private place to use.
- Recognize that the conflict belongs to the children.
- Help children recognize their responsibility in a conflict situation.
- Believe in the children's ability to solve their conflicts and provide the tools they need in order to do so.
- Focus children on how to prevent future conflicts.

## TEACHER TIPS FOR TEACHING IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

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- Take responsibility for children's safety.
- Use nonverbal ways to calm children.
- Acknowledge, accept and validate all children's feelings and perceptions of the conflict.
- Help children verbalize feelings and desires to each other. Especially hard – help them to listen to each other.

## 5 FINGER STEPS FOR TEACHING CHILDREN TO RESOLVE THEIR CONFLICTS

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- **Thumb:** Cool down in the peace place.
- **Pointer:** Clarify and state the problem.  
Examples of clarifying and stating the problem:
  - So, you (child 1) say that \_\_\_\_ happened, and you (child 2) say that \_\_\_\_ happened. Is that right?
  - So, the problem is that we have one \_\_\_\_\_, and both of you want it. Is that right?
  - So, when you (child 1) did \_\_\_\_\_, you (child 2) didn't like it, and you did \_\_\_\_\_. Is that how it happened?
- **Tall man:** Give children the opportunity to suggest solutions. Propose solutions, but only when convinced that children have tried and just do not have ideas.  
Examples of giving children words to say:
  - Can you tell him that you didn't like it when he hit you? Say, "I didn't like it when you hit me."
  - Tell her how it made you feel when she took your toy. Say, "It made me sad."
  - Would you like me to say it for you? Okay. "He didn't like it when you pushed him off the swing. He says that he was there first."
- **Ringer:** Go for it!
  - Uphold the value of mutual agreement, and give children the opportunity to reject proposed solutions. This is particularly important for a compliant child who may too quickly give in to a more dominant child.
  - Teach impartial procedures for settling disputes where a decision is arbitrary (e.g., rock-paper-scissors; toss a coin).
  - When both children lose interest in a conflict, do not pursue.
  - Help children recognize their responsibility in a conflict situation.
  - Offer opportunity for restitution if appropriate.  
Examples of restitution:
    - Getting a bandage
    - Helping to get an ice bag and holding it on the hurt spot
    - Repairing a damaged item (toy, picture, block structure, etc.)
    - Giving the person something to replace an item that was destroyed
- **Pinky:** Follow up.
  - Help children repair the relationship, but do not force children to be insincere (i.e., do not make a child apologize).
  - Encourage children to resolve their conflicts by themselves when they have had sufficient practice.

## RESOURCES FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS

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- [www.challengingbehavior.org/](http://www.challengingbehavior.org/)
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL): <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/>
- Responsive Classroom <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/a-quiet-place-for-rough-moments/>
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (OSEP Technical Assistance Center): <http://www.pbis.org>
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports <https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-3/social-stories/how-to-make-a-social-story-fact-sheet/>
- Pyramid Consortium: <http://www.pyramidmodel.org/>
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI):
- Vanderbilt Tip Sheets <https://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/assets/files/tipsheets/socialstoriestips.pdf>

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Use 5 fingers to help children (and adults) remember the steps.

### 5 Finger Conflict Resolution:

1. Cool down (thumb)
2. Identify the problem (pointer)
3. Brainstorm solutions (tall man)
4. Go for it (ringer)
5. Follow-up (pinky)

(Gartrell, 2004)



Place pictures of lips and of an ear on craft sticks and place in a basket near the Peace Bench. Visual cues can be very effective for beginning peacemakers. In large or small group time, outside of an emotional conflict, have children practice taking turns while holding the stick puppets. The child holding the lips gets to speak while the child holding the ear listens. And then they exchange puppets, so that now the former listener gets to speak while the former speaker listens. This turn taking and listening does not come naturally and must be practiced. Sometimes the lips and ear props provide just enough support for this hard-to-learn skill.

