



by Karen Stephens

Teaching Children to Resolve Conflict Respectfully

At home, child care, or school, children occasionally become embroiled in conflict or a battle of wills with peers or adults — it's inevitable. As ironic as it sounds, it's even desirable. Some bickering and conflict in childhood helps kids discover positive ways of resolving disagreements. When learned well, the skills will come in handy at home and at work throughout life.

If respectful conflict resolution isn't mastered during early childhood, the skills are much harder to learn; they rarely become second-nature to an adult. The consequence is reflected by domestic violence and assault crimes that shatter our neighborhoods.

In each developmental stage, children gradually expand their capacity to balance their personal rights, needs, and wants with those of others. As children learn to do that, they develop constructive social skills as well as their own character.

Key to teaching children to handle conflict is helping them identify their emotions. They must also, (and this is the hardest part!) learn to control how they express and act on their emotions. To become socially responsible, it's critical that children exercise choice and decision-making power over their behavior.

There's another challenge in conflict resolution. Children must learn to *interpret* others' emotions. That requires recognizing that everyone has feelings and desires. Being sensitive to others and juggling differing perspectives and points of view is very challenging for young children. It takes time and practice.

Helping kids develop conflict resolution skills isn't mysterious or complex, but it does take patience and a consistent approach. Here are tips to help you along:

- **Model a rich “feelings” vocabulary.** From infancy, begin putting words to emotions. Pair words with facial expressions; it helps children understand feeling. “When you squirm I can tell it's frustrating getting your diaper changed. Hold on for just a minute longer.”

Encourage toddlers to empathize by *translating* others' body language: “That boy is upset; he's crying because someone grabbed his toy from him. He wants it back.”

With preschoolers, introduce words to *name* feelings associated with conflict such as: frightened, anxious, mad, scared, angry, worried, nervous, afraid, frustrated, confused, lonely, tricked, ignored, left out, embarrassed, mad, and unimportant.

- **Set the standard and enforce limits.** As children grow, share your beliefs and goals. Affirm everyone's right to be safe — emotionally and physically. When children are old enough, lay down ground rules for solving disagreements. Identify behaviors that are, and are not, acceptable: “It's unacceptable to throw toys. Tell me what's wrong.”

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- **Be a good example.** Tell children they can feel any way they wish, but they must control what they do. Illustrate the behavior you expect. If you don't want children yelling, name-calling, or belittling others, change your own ways first.
- **Encourage language as a problem solving tool.** Ask children to tell you what they want or need. Emphasize using language, rather than grunts, shoves or hits: "Tell me if you want more peas."

And remember, 18 month-old children can understand more language than they can speak. Model using language to get along with others: "Tonya, I want to build with blocks, too. May I sit by you, please?"

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- **Help children cope with feelings constructively.** Be on hand to help children *interpret* their emotions: "You seem really angry. It's frustrating when someone gets a toy you wanted first. Crying didn't help. Is there another toy you can play with while you wait for that one?"

Show children how to address problems without aggression. Focus on behavior, not name calling, and on what can be achieved, rather than blaming or shaming. Family educators encourage parents to use "I-Feel" statements and to teach children to use them as well. Here's the format: I feel _____ when you _____ because _____. Next time I would like you to _____. Example: I feel *frustrated* when you *grab at the book* because *it might tear*. Next time, *wait for me to ask you to turn the page*.

- **Offer regular peer play in a positive setting.** Well supervised and developmentally appropriate peer play gives children abundant chances to *practice* conflict resolution. Interview program staff on how they coach children's skills. Observe the setting to see if it is arranged to help children succeed socially. For instance, are there enough toys for children to share without heated conflict? Are there toys that encourage cooperation and turn-taking, such as wagons, puppets, blocks, pretend play items, or table games?
- **Offer choices to toddlers.** Because they are just learning about emotions and language, toddlers need more help sorting things out in conflict. They can even distract themselves with their own tantrums. Interpret first. "Screaming isn't working. Here are two things you can do." When given a clear choice, toddlers are better able to calm down, focus, and follow through. They'll also need more reminders about their choices.
- **Take a stand against physical aggression and name-calling.** Whenever aggression occurs, nip it in the bud: "I won't let you hurt Tom. I'd never let him hit you, either. Think of another way to solve this."
- **Resist solving problems for preschool children; instead guide with questions.** When children turn to you for help, resist separating children, isolating them in chairs, or telling them exactly what to do. Instead, coach them in the basic steps of problem solving.

Give each child a chance to speak. Ask questions that encourage them to analyze the situation and options. "What is the problem?" "What have you already tried to solve it?" "How did it work?" "Is there something else you can do?" After brainstorming possible alternatives, analyze the pros and cons of each solution together. By voting or verbal agreement, select and carry out a plan. If the problem recurs, go back to problem solving.

- **Offer feedback and appreciation.** Comment on productive problem solving: “I heard you and Andy arguing over the red crayon. That was a good idea to reassure him you’d give it to him next.” Or: “I heard you telling Trisha you were angry she knocked down your block building; that was good self control.”
- **Explore ways to amends after conflict.** After conflict most kids go on about their play, but sometimes kids need help knowing how to mend fences. If it’s true, kids can say they are sorry. But there are other ways, too. I often ask, “If you want LaGreta to stay friends, what would make her feel better?” Sometimes a child says, “I’m sorry;” other times they give a hug, draw a picture, or give a flower. Authentic amends is what’s important, not just lip service of “I’m sorry.”

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.