

A Five-Step Process for Conflict Mediation

Conflicts are expressed disagreements between people. They happen all the time in preschool classrooms—and just about everywhere else in life! When a third person assists others in resolving a conflict, this is conflict mediation.

Using developmentally appropriate practice can prevent many disagreements, but even the most effective and engaging preschool classrooms are likely to be the site of daily conflicts. When many small bodies are in a small space for long hours with few adults, disagreements happen. The challenge for teachers—and children—is to recognize conflicts as opportunities for teaching and learning new ways to handle emotions such as frustration or anger.

Teachers can use conflict mediation as a guidance tool when two or more children have a disagreement with one another. The teacher's role in conflict



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mediation is to make sure both parties are equal contributors to a peaceful settlement. (In mediation, a third party helps others settle a conflict; in negotiation, the parties resolve the conflict themselves.) During the mediation the teacher encourages both parties to see themselves as full citizens of the classroom community, capable of solving their problems together and learning from their mistakes.

Teaching through conflict mediation takes time and effort. If teachers commit to this intervention, they are including children's social-emotional learning in the curriculum. In this sense, conflict mediation is central to developmentally appropriate practice: you can't have one without the other. The real-life benefit of using conflict mediation is that children learn to manage conflicts by talking things through themselves.

Here is a five-step problem-solving model of conflict mediation. Dan Gartrell (2000) calls it the *five-finger approach* because each step can be represented by a finger.

1 Cool down (thumb). If necessary, the teacher calms down all parties (including her- or himself) and sets the scene for the mediation process. Note that the teacher may

temporarily separate or remove children as part of this step—but only as a cooling-off period that leads to mediation, not as a punishment.

2 Identify the problem (pointer).

The children (with help from the teacher as needed) put the problem into words and agree on the cause of their disagreement.

3 Brainstorm solutions (tall guy).

The children (with the teacher's help as needed) come up with possible ways to solve the problem. Children often come up with a different solution from the "ideal" one the teacher might have in mind. Try to use the children's ideas, even when you believe justice is not completely served. If the children work it out and agree to it, the solution is logical to them and they benefit from the process.

4 Agree on a solution (ringer).

The parties decide on one solution and try it. The teacher encourages the children to agree on a solution, even if she or he must suggest one from the brainstorming step.

Often, before a solution is implemented, the teacher has a chat with the children, known as a guidance talk. She reviews what happened, talks about alternatives for the next time, and discusses ways to make amends. Occasionally the teacher follows up with one or both children later.

5 Follow up (pinkie). The children try the solution. The teacher follows up by encouraging, monitoring, and if necessary guiding their words and actions. A guidance talk with one or more children may also be a part of this step.

The technique at work

The following anecdote illustrates conflict mediation at work. Kelly, a teacher, shares what happened the first time she mediated a preschool classroom conflict.

I had just finished reading a book to Allie. She set it on the table and asked me to read another book. Charmaine came up and took the book that Allie and I had just put down.

Allie: Charmaine, NO! Give me that back. (*Allie takes the book from Charmaine's hands.*)

Charmaine (*screaming and crying*):

I wanted to look at that! (*Allie holds the book tight, glares at Charmaine, and with her other arm pushes her classmate away.*)

Kelly (*taking one girl on either side of me, with my arms around both of them*): Hey, girls, I think we need to work this out, but first we need to cool down a bit. Can you each take three big breaths? (*Allie shakes her head and turns her back to me.*)





Okay, Allie, you can cool down on your own however you want. (*Charmaine and I count out three big breaths.*) Are you ready to talk yet, Allie?

Allie: Yes. (*She turns back toward us.*)

Kelly: Allie, what happened?

Allie: I was reading that book and . . .

Charmaine: You were not. I got it from the table.

Kelly: Charmaine, you will have your turn too, but right now we are listening to Allie.

Allie: Yeah, so I was reading the book, and Charmaine came over and took it from me.

Kelly: Okay, are you done now?

Allie: Yes.

Kelly: Charmaine, what do you think happened?

Charmaine: Allie was done with the book. I was going to read it.

Kelly: So Allie thought she was still using the book, and Charmaine thought she was done. Is that right? (*Both girls nod.*) How do you think we can solve this problem?

Charmaine: Maybe Allie can just give me the book.

Kelly: Would that work for both of you?

Allie: No, I am not done with it yet. Let me read it one more time.

Kelly: One more time and then you will give it to Charmaine? Charmaine, what do you think of that?

Charmaine (*shrugs shoulders*): Okay.

Kelly: Thank you, Charmaine. I like how you both solved the problem together. (*Charmaine gets up to play with other toys, and Allie returns to my lap with the book.*) Allie, you made me sad when you took the book away from Charmaine like that. What else could you have done instead of pulling and pushing?

Allie: Asked her for it?

Kelly: I think that sounds like a good idea. How could you have asked?

Allie: Charmaine, I am not done yet. Give it back to me now!

Kelly: Could you add a friendly word on the end?

Allie (*grins*): Please.

Kelly: You got it! (*I leave to check on another group, and I see Allie briefly look at the book, then get up and give it to Charmaine.*)

Allie: Here.

Charmaine: Thanks.

Allie then went to a different center and continued playing.

Kelly used the five-finger formula with success. Let's look at what happened.

Thumb: Cool down. Kelly suggested each child take three deep breaths. Allie said no, and Kelly perceptively accepted this decision in order to keep the cool-down process going (*Why start a second conflict!*). No one can negotiate when they are upset. Calming all parties is essential.

Pointer: Identify the problem. Without taking sides or moralizing, Kelly stayed neutral during this step. She encouraged the children to take turns talking and to agree: "Allie, you thought . . . and Charmaine, you thought . . . Is that right?"

Tall Guy: Brainstorm solutions. Kelly got the children to make suggestions, cross-checking with each child. She did not side with either or impose a solution on both. She quietly facilitated. This is called *low-level mediation*. With children who are younger or who have strong unmet needs, the teacher becomes a more active word coach. This is called *high-level mediation*. Always, the goal is to move the children toward negotiating for themselves.

Adapted from Dan Gartrell, "Guidance Matters" *Young Children* 61 (March 2006): 88–89.



Ringer: Agree on a solution. In conflict mediation, the teacher never knows what the outcome will be and does not impose one. This lack of control over the outcome makes conflict mediation difficult for some teachers. What Kelly did was control the process. This is where the real leadership comes in.

Pinky: Follow up. Notice two things about the resolution. First, after each child had her say, each compromised a little. Charmaine let Allie have “one more time.” Allie gave the book to Charmaine without re-reading it. Charmaine said, “Thanks.” Second, it was after the conflict was resolved and Charmaine walked away, and not during the mediation, that Kelly had a guidance talk with Allie.

A guidance talk is a conversation about what a child could do differently next time to manage a conflict more peaceably. After Allie felt success through the mediation, she was willing to have the guidance talk. (Sometimes the teacher uses a guidance talk with both children, together or separately, but always at the end of the mediation.)

How do teachers know when mediation works? The children at least go along with the solution—as in the anecdote—and very often end up playing together as though a conflict never occurred. (You’ve probably seen this happen.)

When teachers use conflict mediation successfully, they avoid reinforcing in children the roles of bully and victim. Both of these roles perpetuate unhealthy self-images, additional conflicts, and negative classroom dynamics. Instead, the adults sustain an encouraging classroom in which all children are helped to feel they are worthy, contributing members. Children learn to negotiate their conflicts peaceably, and social-emotional intelligences develop and thrive.

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Children who come to a preschool where people don’t speak their language may react by withdrawing or acting out. Having clear rules and a predictable schedule, especially in the beginning, helps children know what is expected of them. Try to find time each day for children to talk with someone in their own language. A bilingual volunteer can offer a listening ear and provide some encouragement to help a child feel supported.

REFERENCE

Gartrell, D.J. 2000. *What the kids said today*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.

For more on guidance, read the *Young Children* articles “Replacing Time-Out: Part One—Using Guidance to Build an Encouraging Classroom” and “Replacing Time-Out: Part Two—Using Guidance to Maintain an Encouraging Classroom” at naeyc.org/tyc.