



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Contemporary Early Childhood Education**

## **Conflict Management**

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A conflict is an expressed disagreement between individuals. Conflicts, and interactions around them, define much of human life, every moment of every day. The term *conflict management* refers to the process of making conflicts manageable so they can be resolved civilly and cooperatively by the parties involved.

Two related terms are *conflict mediation* and *conflict resolution*. Conflict mediation refers to the leadership provided by a third party that guides parties in conflict to resolve the conflict. Conflict resolution, for the sake of this discussion, refers to a formal process of conflict mediation that typically involves application of a specific system and sometimes includes institutional involvement, such as a formalized conflict mediation service. This entry first discusses the phases of conflict management and the skills children need to develop to manage conflict. It then discusses the role of the caring adult in helping young children with conflict management.

According to Susanne Wichert, learning to manage conflicts by young children occurs in three phases: (1) *high-level mediation*, during which a third party works as an active coach to calm the conflicted parties and lead the children through the mediation process; (2) *low-level mediation*, when children have progressed in learning calming and mediation steps and, with a leader's facilitation, take on some dynamics of the mediation themselves; (3) *child negotiation*, during which at least one child in the conflict takes leadership in the calming and negotiation processes, and the children resolve the conflict on their own.

### Developmental Dynamics

An accepted goal of caregivers in relation to social-emotional development is that young children gain a psychological foundation in the cluster of skills needed to resolve problems civilly. In reality, leaders continue to work on these high-level skills their entire lives:

- Impulse control, or calming one's self enough to approach the conflict civilly
- A willingness to join with the other in solving the problem
- Perspective taking—the ability to understand a situation as the other party perceives it
- Expression of thoughts and feelings in ways that are not hurting to the other
- Positive adaptation of past experience to productively address the present situation
- Developing communication abilities that, with an adult's assistance, allow participation in the conflict mediation process

The operation some brain psychologists use to describe the utilization of this skill cluster is *executive function*. Executive function seems to begin development at about age 3 and does not operate with full developmental maturity until a person is in his or her mid-20s. Preschool children are just beginning the brain development that makes possible the affective, cognitive, social, and language skills needed for conflict management. Because of nascent executive function and a lack of social experience, young children make mistakes in behavior relative to these skills, resulting in frequent conflicts that they cannot easily resolve on their own.

Young children's stress levels have direct and continuing impact on the development of executive function. An unmanageable stress level, termed *toxic stress* by Jack P. Shonkoff and Andrew S. Garner, causes the child to perceive even everyday situations as threatening. Perceived threat causes amygdala-driven cortisol reactions in the brain that override developing executive function and trigger survival behavior that frequently includes aggression. Aggressive, self-defensive impulses escalate conflicts and make management

efforts, both mediated by the leader and initiated by the child through executive function, difficult. A meta-analysis by Megan R. Gunnar, Adriana Herrera, and Camelia E. Hostinar concluded that children who fall into a cycle of *stress–conflict–aggression–leader discipline–continued stress* face significant long-term challenges in relation to conflict management ability and long-term mental health and social relations.

The same meta-analysis determined that sustained, secure relationships with adults are essential for children to gain the trust necessary to weather missteps in learning this complex skill cluster. Positive adult guidance, through secure primary attachments with family members and secure secondary attachments with early childhood professionals, is critical for the development of the conflict management skill cluster.

### Modeling and Teaching Conflict Management

The caring adult's priority, both in terms of immediate situations and broader developmental dynamics, is to help the child keep stress at manageable levels, so that conflict management skills can be learned. When intervening in pronounced conflicts, a *first step* is to calm all parties down, beginning with the adult who is intervening.

A usual calming strategy is to acknowledge each child's upset feelings and use soothing words to de-escalate the conflict. When one or both children have lost emotional control, the adult guides them in a calming process that typically includes physical distancing from the place of conflict and enough time for the children to regain composure. Separation to a quiet spot is **not** "a time out," or removal as a consequence of something the child has done. Instead, moving the child away from the conflict is effected so that the child can become calm and mediation can occur: It is a nonpunitive *cooling down time*. The caregiver may use soothing words, physical proximity to the child, or intentional distance, whatever works to assist the individual child to calm down. Some children may need more time than the teacher might typically allow in order to become calm. For the sake of the individual child, or for general classroom management reasons, the leader may conduct the remaining steps of mediation later in the day.

A *second step* is for the leader to mediate an agreement as to how each child saw the conflict. For this step to be successful, the leader needs to be firm, friendly, and impartial. The objective is not to establish who is right and who is wrong, but to guide each child to agree about how that child *and the other child* each viewed the matter in dispute.

A *third step* is to guide the children in brainstorming possible solutions to the dilemma. Depending on language development and abilities, the leader might nudge the children into suggesting solutions themselves, or offer solutions herself or himself.

A *fourth step* is to lead the children to agree to try a solution. The leader's objective during the fourth step is to facilitate the solution all have agreed to. Often reconciliation is a part of the solution. The leader does not force an apology, which might result in conflicted feelings, but asks the children how they can each help the other to feel better. If the mediation has been successful, most children will have ideas about this.

The *fifth step* is to monitor and follow up on the solution. In relation to the immediate situation, the leader observes the children's behaviors and provides positive feedback as to their efforts. She or he talks further with the children to teach future alternative responses that would prevent conflict-escalation and possible harm. The leader especially talks with either child

who used aggression during the conflict about techniques for managing impulses and strong feelings—such as summoning a leader and/or leaving the situation.

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**See also** Aggression; Brain Development; Child Development and Early Childhood Education; Emotional Development; Executive Functioning; Guiding Behavior; Neuroscience and Early Education; Self-Regulation; Social Skills and School Success; Social-Emotional Competence

### Further Readings

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