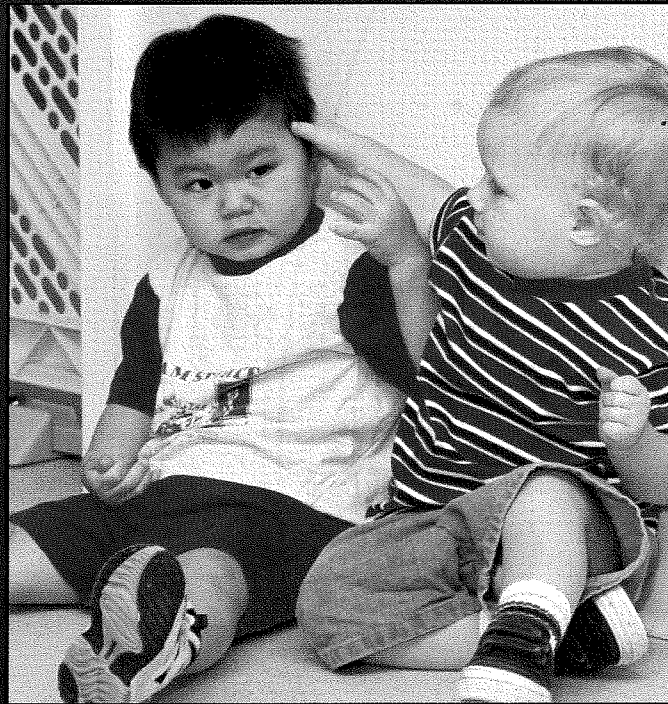




Turning Conflicts Into Learning — Problem Solving II



Characteristics of Preschoolers

Egocentrism: The child is *only* able to feel and think about his or her own point of view. This characteristic makes it difficult for young children to understand how another person is feeling. Questions such as “How do you think that makes her feel?” are *not* understood by young children. The problem-solving process is very useful for young children because it offers opportunities for them to hear about the needs of others while working towards a solution that will meet everyone’s individual needs.

Concrete thinking: Children base their understanding of the world on obvious physical characteristics. It is important, therefore, that we talk through the problem-solving process in very concrete terms. It is not useful to say to children, “You must share.” This is too abstract and fails to describe a specific action. The problem-solving process will help children consider specific ways that disputed materials can be used by both children. Discussion of the *details* of the dispute will always be a central part of the conflict-resolution process.

Limited verbal skills: For very young children, who are still in the early stages of problem solving, the adult must do a lot of the “talking through” that is needed to resolve a problem. Providers can do this by asking questions that the child can answer with a yes, no, or nod of the head. For example, the provider might say:

“I can see that you are both upset. Are you angry because you both want to use the truck?” (Look for response.) “I think we can figure out a way for you both to have a turn. Should we use the timer?” (Look for response, child gets timer). “Sam, would you like to hold the timer first?” (Look for response.) “Jane, Sam will hold the timer. When all the salt has gone through, it will be his turn to use the truck. OK?” (Look for response.)

In this way the adult includes the children as much as possible, increasing the opportunities for them to participate verbally as they become more mature.

Physical expressiveness: Children at this young age express most of their feelings physically, showing excitement by yelling and moving their bodies or sadness by crying. We should not be surprised when they hit, yell, or physically try to get what they want. This is the only way they

know. To understand the child who is just learning to manage feelings, think of what an adult experiences in learning a new language. Suppose you are just learning Spanish and find yourself in a Spanish-speaking country. Under pressure, you would probably revert to English; only in clearer moments, and with encouragement and support, could you speak a little Spanish. Likewise, children who are upset revert to less mature ways of expressing themselves. It is important to discourage *but not punish* this normal tendency and instead to focus attention on helping children learn the skills that will eventually replace their primary, physical mode of expression.

Exploration of independence and control: Children are just realizing and exploring their separateness from the adults they are close to; they are becoming aware that they can make their own choices and decisions. Sometimes this means that the child wants to have *all* the control and make *all* the choices at once. The problem-solving process is very useful in helping the child to feel in control while looking realistically at what the cause-and-effect implications of certain decisions might be.

Holding just one or two things in mind at a time: Children cannot keep a lot of ideas in mind at once. The caregiver who is supporting children's problem solving can help children communicate about the details of their situation by restating the information children have shared, in clear and simple language, by helping children explore solutions, and by keeping the problem-solving process on track when children become distracted. When children's attention wanders, it is important to consider whether this is due to an external distraction (for example, something happening nearby) or something internal (the children may have lost interest in the process or problem). If the distraction is external, the caregiver may need to help children refocus on the situation. When children are no longer interested in the process, however, it is important for the provider to quickly summarize what has happened and let the children move on in a way that is agreeable to all:

Children: *We don't want this truck anyway. Let's go do puzzles.*

Adult: *So you don't want to figure out how to use this truck now. Let's put it away so you can go do puzzles.*

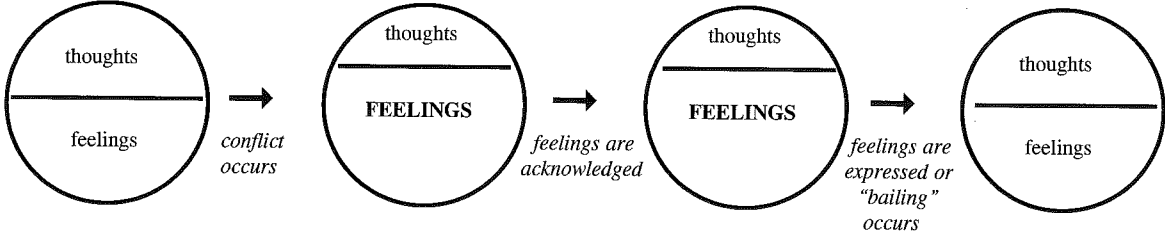
Steps for Solving Problems and Resolving Conflicts

- 1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions:** Observe as you approach, and prepare yourself for a positive outcome. Be aware of your body language; it says a lot about your intentions and feelings. It is important to be neutral in order to respect all the points of view. If you do not feel able to stay neutral, use an “I” statement (“I’m so angry because hitting hurts people”) and delay the problem-solving process until you are able to be neutral.
- 2. Acknowledge children’s feelings:** Give recognition to the feelings the children are expressing by using simple, descriptive words (“You seem angry/sad/upset”). Use words that also reflect the *intensity* of their emotions (“You are *very, very* upset”). This will ultimately help the child “let go” of the feelings, although the feelings may briefly increase in intensity before they subside. This “emptying out” is an important step that must occur before children can think clearly about solutions. Once children have let go of their feelings, let them know that you think *they* can figure out a way to solve their problem.
- 3. Gather information:** Tell children you want to hear from each of them. Ask open-ended questions that help them describe the details of the *actions* or *materials* that are part of the problem (not “*Why* did you do this?” or “How do you think she feels?” — such questions are too abstract). Listen carefully for the details and needs children are describing; they are the key to finding the solution.
- 4. Restate the problem:** Using the details and needs children have described, restate the problem, clarifying any issues by asking for more detail, and reframing any hurtful language. (For example, “You can’t play ’cuz I hate you” can be reframed as “You are very angry and you want to play alone?”) Check with the children to see if they agree that you have identified the problem.

5. **Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together:** Respect and explore all of the children's ideas, even if they seem unrealistic, considering how each might work. Help children think through the specifics of cause and effect so that complicated or general solutions become concrete and possible to carry out. Children may suggest, for example, "We can share." A suggested solution like this needs further exploration so that the actions that will happen are clear to all concerned.

6. **Be prepared to give follow-up support:** Children may need help in implementing the solution, or difficulties may arise because one of the children is still carrying angry feelings that need further acknowledgment. Check with each of the children to see if the problem has been solved, especially children who have been very upset.

Acknowledging Feelings



Helping Children Resolve Disputes and Conflicts

Alice and Sam are playing house. They are dressing up and at the same moment they reach for the only colorful scarf. They tug back and forth, yelling, "I got it first! Give it to me!"

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Emma and Joe are in the block corner building a dinosaur house together. Joe accidentally knocks down a section of the building. Emma pushes him and angrily yells, "Get out!"

Providers and caregivers working in family child care homes see many conflict situations like these. These incidents often create feelings of frustration and failure for both children and adults. Many times it isn't clear what has happened, who is responsible, or how the problem can be resolved. The feelings of everyone involved are often strong and confused. Yet these are very important occasions for learning.

Providers can turn disputes and conflicts into positive experiences by understanding the **developmental needs** of young children, using **problem-prevention strategies**, and engaging the child in a **conflict resolution process**. By settling disputes with their playmates, children gain an understanding of how to respect the needs of others while meeting their own needs. They learn that there is often more than one "right" side in a dispute, that feelings are important, and that there are many possible "win-win" solutions to conflicts.

Understanding Developmental Needs

When we engage in problem solving and conflict resolution with young children, it is important to keep their developmental needs in mind. First, **young children are very egocentric** (self-centered), which makes it difficult for them to understand the needs of others. Young children are not being "bad" or selfish when they ignore another child's rights or needs — it is simply

very difficult for them to look beyond themselves. Since the child who is having a dispute with another child often isn't aware of the other child's point of view, it's important for providers in such situations to **acknowledge and talk about what each child is feeling.**

A second developmental characteristic of young children is that they are at an important stage in developing independence. They are just beginning to develop relationships outside their families and to explore the world as independent people. As a result, they often need to feel in control and have their independence affirmed. When children are upset, helping them recognize their own feelings (and those of others involved in the situation) can contribute to their sense of being in control — this is another reason providers should talk about the feelings of each child in a conflict. Another way for providers to affirm the child's independence and sense of control is to **engage the child as an active participant in the problem-solving process.** Statements like “Let's try to solve this problem together” encourage each child involved in a dispute to take an active role in resolving it.

A third characteristic of young children that affects their ability to resolve conflicts is their tendency to think concretely. We know that children of preschool age are unable to deal with abstractions: *they learn best when information is concrete and specific.* So, in helping to resolve a conflict between children, avoid general statements like “You must learn to share.” Instead, **give children specific information** that will help them work out the details of sharing.

We've outlined several general principles to follow in working with young children in conflict situations. Now let's see how a provider applied these principles in the example that opens this article. Alice and Sam were fighting over a scarf they both wanted. In responding, the provider spoke to the children in a calm, matter-of-fact tone: *“Alice and Sam, I can see that you both really want to use the scarf. It is hard when there are not enough scarves for both of you. Let's think of some ways that we can solve this problem.”* This kind of approach helps to calm everyone involved in a conflict and makes shared problem solving possible. Note that the providers started by **recognizing the feelings and desires** of both Alice and Sam in **specific** terms. She then gave a clear message that **they could work together to solve the problem.** Then, in moving toward a solution, the provider was again careful to be specific: *“Sam, Alice*

says she would like to wear the scarf for five minutes. Would you like to use the sand timer so that you will know when her five minutes are over?"

Problem-Prevention Strategies

In the example of Alice and Sam, the provider intervened skillfully in the children's dispute. But this incident might have been prevented if more colorful scarves had been available. Providing extra sets of similar materials is a good example of a strategy providers can use to prevent conflicts — there are many others. Some general principles of **problem prevention** are listed below:

- **Keep expectations for behavior developmentally appropriate.** Respect and plan for children's different abilities, interests, and pacing levels.
- **Have many choices for play available.** Materials should be plentiful, and it should be easy for children to get them out and put them away.
- **Set clear limits for children's behavior.** Use them consistently and give reasons why the limits are important.
- **Establish a consistent daily routine** and communicate it clearly, using pictures or drawings to make the segments concrete.
- **Model respectful ways of interacting with others and using materials.** The behaviors you model are the easiest ones for the children to learn.
- **Plan for transitions.** Keep them short and make them playful.

When these types of prevention strategies are in place, children will be more focused and purposeful in their play and there will be fewer disputes and conflicts. Nevertheless, conflict will not disappear.

As discussed earlier in this booklet, there are six steps you can take to help children settle disputes whenever they arise. The steps have been adapted for young children from the conflict resolution literature, incorporating the child development principles described earlier. We repeat the steps below, this time using the opening example of Emma and Joe to show how each step works.

Steps in Resolving Conflicts

- 1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions:** The provider observes what is happening between Emma and Joe as she approaches the block corner, and prepares herself for a *positive* outcome.
- 2. Acknowledge feelings:** The provider says, *“Emma, you sound very angry with Joe, and Joe, you look quite sad. Let’s try to solve this problem together so that you can continue to build your dinosaur house.”*
- 3. Gather information:** *“Can you tell me what happened?”* asks the provider. Emma and Joe each have a turn to say what happened in their own words.
- 4. Restate the problem:** After listening carefully for the details, the provider says, *“Joe, you want to use the blocks and Emma, you don’t want Joe to build because he is knocking down the building. Is that right? . . . Do you both want to keep building here?”* (Emma and Joe nod their heads to both questions.)
- 5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together:** The provider then asks, *“If you both want to continue building, what do you think we should do now? How can we work this out?”* Emma says, *“I want to build this part by myself. Joe can build over there.”* Joe says excitedly, *“Hey, I can build the dinosaurs a swimming pool!”* Emma says, *“Yeah!”* The provider says, *“Emma and Joe, it seems you both want to play here, and that you each want to build separate parts of the dinosaur house. Is that right?”* Emma and Joe both say yes and

begin to build. The provider says, "*You both had ideas for solving your problem together! I'd like to see the dinosaur house when it is finished.*"

- 6. Be prepared to give follow-up support:** The provider stations herself nearby as Joe and Emma start to play, to make sure the solution works for both of them.

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Just as with any new set of skills, it takes practice to learn to apply the process of conflict resolution. With time and repeated positive experiences, both children and providers will come to rely on this shared process.

Source: Evans, Betsy. (May/June 1992). *HighScope Extensions*. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.

Role-Play Guidelines for Training Participants

Role play is a dynamic, challenging technique for helping to make new adult-child interaction strategies clear and concrete for providers attending training. Some training participants enjoy it and some do not. How you may respond depends on your personal experiences. We want all participants to feel safe and supported during role play, and therefore most role plays will be structured in the following manner:

1. The role plays will occur in groups of four: two children, a mediator, and a coach.
 - **Children:** You are asked to act like children that you know. Sometimes it helps to visualize a specific child. *Do not* choose the most difficult child you know for the role play. The focus needs to stay on the process of problem solving, not on answering questions about individual children or on giving the mediator the experience of your hardest child. There will be a time to talk about difficult children. Don't participate in the coach-mediator conversations. It will be less confusing for everyone if you stay in your role as children, sitting quietly during the coach-mediator conversations.
 - **Coach:** Your role is to observe, to keep the group on task, to talk with the mediator if he or she wants to stop the action, and to discuss what can be done next.
 - **Mediator:** You can "stop the action" at any time and discuss what is happening with the coach. You can also "roll back" the action if there is something you would like to try differently. This is practice — it *can* be done over!
2. When the role play is finished, the mediator needs to be the first to describe what he or she did effectively. Then the other three participants will describe specifically what was effective. A discussion may follow about what might have been done differently. Avoid evaluative language. Focus on specific strategies.

Cooling Down Conflicts

Conflicts heat up when you . . .

- Use “you” statements
- Use intense body language (shaking a finger, grabbing a child)
- Make accusations or blame children
- Focus on the past
- Focus on the person rather than the problem
- Focus on your position
- Make assumptions

Conflicts cool down when you . . .

- Use “I” statements
- Use gentle body language
- Are specific
- Focus on the present and the future
- Focus on the problem
- Focus on children’s needs and interests
- Listen carefully to both sides of the issue

Source: Adapted with permission from *Mediator Training Manual*, Franklin Mediation Services, Greenfield, MA (1989).