

# *Helping Children Learn to* **Resolve Conflicts**



*Ways Families Can Help Their  
Children Do Better in School*



# Helping Children Learn to Resolve Conflicts

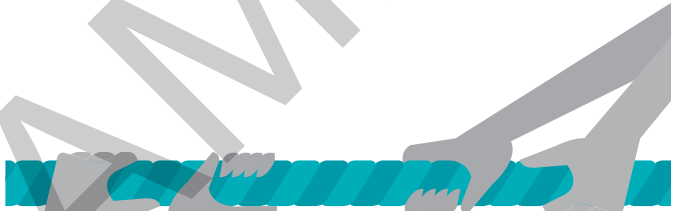
Whether it's a disagreement with a friend, a run-in with a teacher or an argument with parents, all children experience conflicts in their everyday lives. Conflicts can happen at home, in school or in the community.

Conflicts can produce stress, hurt friends, strain family bonds and disrupt school and learning.

But they don't have to. Children can learn to manage conflicts. They can learn to express their feelings in ways that lead to better decisions and stronger relationships. Working through conflicts—and not just avoiding them—can help children reach their goals.

Families can encourage the skills and attitudes children need to resolve the conflicts they face.

This booklet is full of practical ideas to help you help your child learn how to resolve and even benefit from conflicts.



**Tip:** *Don't expect to put all the ideas in this booklet into practice right away. The best way to make changes is one step at a time. Focus on one or two ideas—and don't forget to celebrate progress.*

# Are You Setting a Good Example?

*"Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."*

— James Baldwin

**T**ake this quiz to see what kind of conflict-resolution example you are setting at home. Respond "Yes" or "No" to the following statements:

1. **I try to treat others** (including my child) as I would like to be treated. My actions show my child: "This is the way we treat one another, even if we're upset."
2. **I keep the lid on hurtful anger.** When I am angry with my child, I focus on the behavior ("It was irresponsible to leave your assignment at school") rather than on my child's personality ("You're so irresponsible!").
3. **I stay as calm as possible** when I am angry with my child. I state my anger in a firm voice—without yelling—reminding my child of family rules and how I feel about the situation.
4. **I don't duck tough issues.** Discussing problems as soon as they start shows my child how to keep them from exploding into bigger problems.
5. **I admit it when I'm wrong.** When I can admit an error, my child learns to do the same. It teaches that part of growing up is taking responsibility for what you say and do. It stops many conflicts.

## How did you do?

If you responded "No" to any of these statements, use ideas from the quiz to set a better example for your child of how to resolve conflicts.

# 12 Things to Try

Thinking before acting can help your child resolve many conflicts. To teach your child how to resolve conflicts peacefully:

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1. **Emphasize** what your child is doing right over what your child is doing wrong.
  2. **Set expectations** that your child is capable of meeting.
  3. **Listen** to your child's point of view.
  4. **Be sensitive** to what embarrasses your child and avoid teasing.
  5. **Respect** your child's privacy.
  6. **Talk with**—rather than at—your child.
  7. **Say positive things** about your child in the presence of others.
  8. **Model strategies** for staying calm, like taking deep breaths.
  9. **Use positive discipline**, and avoid hitting or yelling when your child misbehaves.
  10. **Encourage** your child to make decisions.
  11. **Express confidence** in your child's abilities.
  12. **Take seriously** any violent outbursts, bullying or fighting your child exhibits.

# Talk With Your Child About Ways to Handle Conflicts

People have choices in dealing with conflicts. Sometimes, depending on the situation, one way is better than another. Before conflicts arise, talk with your child about when it is appropriate to use each of the following five strategies:

- 1. Avoidance.** This involves not addressing the problem at all. It is always good to take time to cool down and think. But if issues never get addressed, your child may lose the opportunity to express feelings and opinions.
- 2. Accommodation.** This involves yielding to the other person's point of view, wants and needs—and not asserting your own. It's useful when the issue at hand is not as important to your child as other issues.
- 3. Compromise.** This involves seeking a middle ground solution that partially satisfies you and the other person. It's good for minor disagreements, or when collaboration fails.
- 4. Confrontation.** This involves insisting on addressing the issue with the other person face-to-face. Of course, hitting, bullying, name-calling and other acts that hurt people physically or emotionally are *never* acceptable.
- 5. Collaboration.** This involves working together to find a solution that will satisfy the needs of all parties. It is the ultimate goal in problem-solving. Everyone can achieve their goals. It's great for relationships.

# Teach Your Child 'Active Listening'

Conflicts are often just misunderstandings. To resolve a conflict, it's important to listen to the other person's thoughts and feelings and understand them. But usually people are so busy thinking about what they're going to say (or shout) next that they don't really hear what the other person is saying. That's why "active listening" is a great way to resolve a conflict.

Practice these "active listening" steps with your child:

- **Take turns speaking.** Only one person can talk at a time. The first speaker explains their view of the issue. "The thing that makes me mad is ... ." The other person listens.
- **Focus on the speaker.** Make eye contact. Nod your head. Concentrate on what the person is saying.
- **Summarize what the speaker just said.** When the first speaker is finished, you must summarize what that person said *before you can speak*. Say, "You said the main thing that makes you mad is ... (review the main points—no judging or evaluating—just summarize). Is that right?" The first speaker must approve your summary before it's your turn to speak.

It's amazing what happens when you summarize. The other person will feel understood. And both people will be less likely to get caught up in defending themselves and their positions.

- **Take your turn.** Now you talk and your partner listens carefully to you, summarizing what you said before speaking again.

Active listening really works, and it's not limited to two people. Try it with the whole family when there's a disagreement. It teaches good listening—and it's a great way to resolve conflicts!

# Help Your Child See Others' Strengths

A child who thinks of others in a negative way often acts that way toward them. The reverse is also true.

Encourage your child to see a person's strengths instead of faults. Instead of viewing someone as rude, consider that the person might be open and direct. Instead of bossy, the person might be thought of as a leader. Stubbornness can be seen as determination. A person who seems lazy may be someone who's able to relax. An person who appears angry may be just standing up for personal beliefs.

# Teach Your Child to Be Accepting

To live peacefully in our diverse society, children need to be accepting of others' ideas.

Find examples in news articles or on TV of people with whom you disagree. Talk with your child about how to work with people who hold beliefs different from your own.

Tell your child that being accepting of another person's beliefs does not mean you have to change your own views.

Point out how some of your own views may also seem "different" to others.



# Talk About Prejudice & Discrimination

Look for opportunities to talk with your child about the injustice of prejudice and discrimination. You can:

- **Point out prejudice**, stereotyping and discrimination when you see it.
- **Make a firm rule** that your child should not exclude or tease others.
- **Teach your child ready-made responses.** If another child is called a hurtful name, your child might say, "Don't say that. Call people by their names."
- **Set an example.** Say, "That kind of joke offends me."

## An 'Anger Diary' Can Boost Self-Understanding

Knowing what pushes those "anger buttons" can help your child prepare to handle anger constructively.

Some children get angry when they're embarrassed, if someone looks at them the wrong way, if they don't get what they want or if they feel their status is threatened.

Or does your child react to a tone of voice? A pointed finger? Bad calls in sports? Being falsely accused of something? Being treated unfairly?

And how does your child usually deal with anger? Your child will find out by recording every instance of anger in an "anger diary."

Suggest writing down what caused the anger and why, how your child handled it and what happened as a result. (Younger children can draw pictures.)

Discuss each incident. Be sympathetic if your child has been treated unfairly. But be honest in pointing out when your child used poor judgment, displayed inappropriate anger or violated someone else's rights.



# Use a TV Log to Talk About Anger

The next time your child watches TV, provide a TV log to fill out. Or watch TV together and record your reactions separately.

The goal is to develop your child's ability to recognize anger and to understand both productive and unproductive ways of handling it.

Name of Show:

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- Describe a situation in which someone got angry.
- Describe the physical signs of anger the person showed.
- Describe what the person did to handle the anger. Was it effective?
- If anger was handled aggressively, what led the anger to turn into aggression?
- What could have been done to better manage the conflict and the anger it caused?

# Let Your Child Help You With a Problem

One strategy for teaching your child about resolving conflicts is to share your own difficulties in managing conflicts.

When appropriate, ask what your child would do with a problem you are facing. Talk about your feelings. And look together at the pros and cons of certain actions.

# Conflict Resolution and Bullying

**S**trong conflict resolution skills can help prevent bullying. But first, it's important to understand that bullying is *not* the same as normal conflict among peers.

Bullying is an inappropriate and damaging pattern of behavior where a more powerful child targets a less powerful one. And it's not necessarily physical power—a more popular child may bully a less popular one. Or a student who has access to embarrassing information about a classmate may use that power to bully.

Even though peer conflict and bullying aren't the same thing, there are things you can do that will help with conflict resolution *and* make your child less likely to participate in bullying. You can:

- **Encourage empathy for others.** Experts call empathy the “bullying antidote.” When your child understands and cares about how others feel, your child may find it easier to resolve conflicts *and* be less likely to bully.
- **Model kindness and use positive discipline.** Using physical punishment, threats and humiliation can make a child more likely to behave the same way toward others.
- **Avoid letting conflicts to go unresolved** so that anger builds up. A child may take that anger out by bullying others.

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/other-types-of-aggressive-behavior>

<https://www.bullycrisis.com/conflict-resolution-skills-that-can-prevent-bullying/>

# Use Humor to Stop Arguments

The next time your children disagree about about which TV show to watch—or about anything they normally argue over—try this:

For five minutes, have them switch roles. Each has to present the other's point of view as clearly and fairly as possible.

Odds are, they'll start laughing and make up. Better yet, they may come up with a compromise so they're both happy.

## Set Ground Rules for Settling Conflicts

- Choose a convenient time.
- Focus on the problem, not the person.
- Share important information.
- Listen with an open mind. Show that you are listening.
- Treat the other person with respect at all times.
- Avoid name-calling, blaming, sneering, interrupting, putting someone down, judging, trying to get even, bringing up the past and making excuses.
- Work on a solution.
- Follow through to correct problems after you agree upon a solution.



# Be Sure Your Child Can Recognize Danger

Tragically, in recent years we have seen an increase in violence by and against children. The use of guns and knives, as well as gang conflict and the low value some people place on human life, make it important for children to be able to recognize danger and take steps to avoid it.

Talk about places and situations to avoid. Teach your child not to provoke someone who has a weapon—apologize, even if your child doesn't mean it; give up money or possessions without a fight; take whatever action is necessary to stay safe.

Talk about where to get help if your child needs it—"Go to a nearby store or a neighbor's house or apartment. Ask someone to call the police."

# Help Your Child See the Positive Side of Criticism

Everyone must face some criticism. And sometimes what feels like criticism can actually be helpful advice.

A coach's feedback can help a child learn to hit a curve ball. A teacher's feedback can improve a child's writing or behavior.

If your child feels criticized, it doesn't have to lead to conflict. Suggest thinking about the purpose of the criticism. Is it positive feedback? Can your child use it to do something better?

If so, have your child try to listen carefully and ask for specific suggestions about how to make positive changes.

# Teach Your Child to Disagree Agreeably

Children can learn to respect others' opinions, even if they don't agree with them. Saying, "I don't agree with what you said," is fine. Saying, "You're a stupid jerk to think that," is not.

# Share Grievances to Deal With Anger

The best way to deal with conflict is with a cool, clear head. Your child can get a grip on anger by "venting" to somebody else. Encourage your child to talk to trusted adults and peers about the problem. Having somebody listen can help. Sometimes just talking out loud can help. The next time your child feels overcome with anger, suggest talking to:

- A friend.
- A parent, sibling or other family member.
- A teacher, school counselor or the principal.
- Another adult.
- A pet.
- A stuffed animal.



# Here's Where to Go for Outside Help

Some conflicts just can't be solved by the people involved. If this happens, here's where you can go for help:

- A teacher, counselor or school principal.
- Your family doctor.
- Your family's religious leader.
- **Online.** Search for names and phone numbers of local agencies that may be able to help.



You *can* help your child learn to resolve conflicts—but it's important to be a “helper,” not a “fixer.”

Fixing problems interferes with learning to:

- Manage feelings.
- Think about others.
- Discover that cooperation really works.

When children learn to work out their own conflicts, they are well on their way to success in school—and in anything they do!

SAMPLE

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