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NF05-628 Helping Children Resolve Conflict *Conflict Mediation Model*

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Helping Children Resolve Conflict

Conflict Mediation Model

Developed by Marjorie Kostelnik, Dean of College of Education & Human Sciences
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During conflict mediation children learn the skills necessary to reach peaceful resolutions. These skills involve communication, compromise, the ability to see how different aspects of a dispute are related and the ability to consider their own perspective as well as that of another person. At first children need a great deal of support to proceed all the way to a negotiated settlement. The adult mediator provides this support, serving as an instructor. As children learn problem-solving procedures and words, they become increasingly capable of solving problems for themselves. There is evidence that these childhood learnings are maintained throughout the adult years. Like any other social skills, children require numerous opportunities to practice conflict resolution under the guidance of a more experienced person.

Adults play an important role in the socialization of children. They help children develop social skills. Children between ages 3 and 10 need to have positive give-and-take social interactions. They need mini-lessons on how to cultivate positive interactions between themselves and others in their social network. Anyone who has more than two children in their care will encounter conflict.

With practice using the eight-step conflict resolution/mediation model you can successfully guide children through resolving their conflicts. This model can be used with children who have developed skills and can verbalize their feelings, usually age three or older.

The role of the adult/mediator in this model is very important. Key points to remember when implementing the model with the children are:

- Physical contact with children is very important. Hold the children. You may rub their backs during the interaction to reinforce your support for each child. (Not all children want to be touched. If a child pulls away, look into the situation deeper.)
- Ask, "What happened here?" Make sure each child is given uninterrupted time to explain their view of the situation, within boundaries.
- Accept and reinforce the solution agreed on by the children. It may not make sense to you.
- Remain calm at all times during the process. Use simple concrete language. Paraphrase any language that is hurtful. End with an open-ended question. Example: "Neither one of you are getting what you want. What do you want?"
- Give the children lots of time to form their thoughts and speak. A question that can be answered with yes or no is not an open-ended question.

Conflict Mediation Model

Conflict mediation involves walking children through a series of steps beginning with problem identification and ending with the implementation of a mutually satisfactory solution. Finally, it can be announced the conflict has ended. You'll provide more or less direction as necessary until some conclusion is reached. The aim of the process is not for you to dictate how children should solve their problem, but help them figure out a solution on their own. Things/items, territory and rights are instances that can be mediated/negotiated. Status, defending others, attention and care, and situation ground rules are not things that can be negotiated.

Step 1: Initiating the mediation process.

Assume the role of a nonpartial mediator. Accomplish this by stopping the aggressive behavior, separating the children and defining the problem. It is important to get down to eye level with the children. You may have to position yourself between the children in order to help them focus on the problem rather than the object, territory or right. This helps the children approach a highly emotional situation in a more objective manner.

Step 2: Clarifying each child's perspective.

Ask each child in turn to state what he or she wants from the situation. Allow each child ample time, without interruption, to state what they want. This step is critical and the children must trust that you will not make an arbitrary decision in favor

of one of the children. Paraphrasing each child's point of view is very important to this step. Children may need your help to tell what they really want.

Step 3: Summing up.

This step happens when you have been able to get from each child enough information to understand each child's perception of the conflict. You then define the dispute in mutual terms, making clear that each child has responsibility for both the problem and its solution. Basically, you state that a problem exists and that a solution must be found.

Step 4: Generating alternatives.

Ask for suggestions from the children involved and from bystanders. Each time a possible solution is offered, paraphrase it to the children directly involved. Ask each child to think about whether this solution will work for them. Work with the children to brainstorm as many possible solutions for the situation as they can. Be cautioned that each child should be a willing participant in the outcome and that no alternative should be forced on any child. It is typical during this procedure for children to reject some alternatives that they may later find acceptable. Therefore, when a suggestion is repeated, you should present it rather than assume it will be rejected again. Sometimes during this process the child may tire and choose to walk away from the process. If the child insists on solving the problem by giving up, respect the decision. With practice, children will increase their skills and will be better able to deal with the time needed to negotiate a settlement that makes both happy.

Step 5: Agreeing on a solution.

Children will reject certain suggestions outright and will indicate that others seem more acceptable. The ultimate goal is to help children create a plan of action that is mutually satisfying. The final agreement usually involves some give and take by both children and may not represent the action the child would take if the youngster did not have to consider another person's point of view. When a solution has been reached, it is important to announce that a resolution has been reached and to state the exact details of the agreement.

Step 6: Reinforcing the problem-solving process.

Praise children for working hard and agreeing on a solution. The message to be communicated is that the process of reaching the solution is as important as the solution itself. Achieve this by acknowledging the emotional investment each child had in the original conflict and the hard work involved in reaching an agreement.

Step 7: Following through.

Help children carry out the terms of the agreement. Accomplish this by reminding children of the terms and, if necessary, physically assisting or demonstrating how to comply. The solution may not make sense to you, but it is important to enforce the details as the children agreed to them. It is critical that you follow through and reinforce the solution agreed on. If not, the children will not trust you in this process in the future. If the plan begins to fall apart, the children should be brought together again to discuss possible revisions.

Step 8: Announce the conflict is over.

As the negotiation process is going on, all the children in the room will be involved and listening because they are interested. As others are listening, they will also be learning the process and will trust you to handle future conflicts. It is important that all the children know the conflict has been successfully resolved.

Studies show that using this model for conflict resolution is successful. It helps children reduce their aggression and expands their ability to resolve conflicts on their own. Children who participate in conflict mediation on a regular basis improve in their ability to engage in the process. Over time, children increase the number and variety of solutions they suggest and decrease the amount of time needed to negotiate a settlement.

Additional Resources

NebFact 153, *Consistency in Discipline*
NebFact 152, *Why Children Misbehave*

Reference

Kostelnik, M., Whiren, A., Soderman, A., Gregory, K., and Stein, L. *Guiding Children's Social Development: Theory to Practice, 4th Edition.* Albany, New York: Delmar, 2002.

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