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1-1-2005

NF05-629 Helping Children Resolve Conflict *Pitfalls to Avoid During Conflict Mediation*

Marjorie Kostelnik
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mkostelnik2@unl.edu

Mary Nelson
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mnelson1@unl.edu

Sarah Effken Purcell
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, spurcell2@unl.edu

Eileen Krumbach
University of Nebraska&#8211Lincoln, ekrumbach1@unl.edu

Janet S. Hanna
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, jhanna1@unl.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Kostelnik, Marjorie; Nelson, Mary; Purcell, Sarah Effken; Krumbach, Eileen; Hanna, Janet S.; Schroeder, Debra E.; Bosch, Kathy; and DeFrain, John, "NF05-629 Helping Children Resolve Conflict *Pitfalls to Avoid During Conflict Mediation*" (2005). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.* Paper 1749.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/extensionhist/1749

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Authors
Marjorie Kostelnik, Mary Nelson, Sarah Effken Purcell, Eileen Krumbach, Janet S. Hanna, Debra E. Schroeder, Kathy Bosch, and John DeFrain

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Published by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources

NF629

Helping Children Resolve Conflict

Pitfalls to Avoid During Conflict Mediation

Developed by Marjorie Kostelnik, Dean of College of Education & Human Sciences
Adapted for Extension Use by Mary Nelson, Extension Educator; Sarah Effken Purcell, Extension Educator; Eileen Krumbach, Extension Educator; Janet Hanna, Extension Educator; Debra Schroeder, Extension Educator; Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialist; John DeFrain, Extension Specialist

When using conflict mediation, children learn skills necessary to reach peaceful solutions. These skills include: 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. You, as mediator, provide this support, serving as a model and instructor. As children learn problem-solving procedures and words, they become increasingly capable of solving problems by themselves. There is evidence that these childhood learnings are maintained throughout the adult years.

It must be remembered that just like any other social skill, children need numerous opportunities to practice conflict resolution under the guidance of a more experienced person. When teaching conflict negotiation skills to children, you need to be aware of and avoid possible pitfalls in the process. There are 10 common mistakes adults make when mediating children's conflict.

Failing to Lay the Groundwork

Prior to starting conflict negotiation, you must have established yourself, in the children's eyes, as someone who cares about them, who will keep them safe, and who is predictable when reacting to children's actions. Children need to know that you will stand by your word and set limits. The model is founded on these primary elements of adult-child relationships. Failure to establish this environment undermines the spirit of the process. The mediation model is most effective when implemented only after children are comfortable and familiar with their caregivers, the surroundings, and the daily routines.

Ignoring Developmental Considerations

Children must be developmentally able to indicate acceptance or rejection of proposed alternatives. Children whose age or development has not reached the point at which they can state their desires, or children who do not speak the same language as the mediator, are not yet ready to engage in this model. Children who can communicate verbally or by using an effective substitute, such as signing, can be successful.

Remain sensitive to children's tolerance for frustration. Not all children are ready to go through all the steps of the process at once. Most children calm down as mediation proceeds. Children whose behavior becomes increasingly agitated are demonstrating a lack of readiness. At that point, terminate the procedure, and enforce a limit to resolve the original conflict: "You both want the red hat. I can't let you hurt each other as a way to decide who gets it, so I will have to decide. Gracie, you can use the red hat for two minutes and then Rachel you can have a two-minute turn." Praise the children for their hard work up to that point: "Gracie and Rachel you worked hard at telling me what you wanted. That helped a lot." Over time children will be able to proceed further in the mediation process.

Mandating Rather Than Mediating

Adults often neglect to use conflict mediation properly because they feel uncomfortable taking their attention away from the entire group in order to focus on one or two children. They worry the mediation process will require more time than they can spare. Instead, they may separate the children, remove the disputed toy and/or dictate an expedient solution. These approaches undoubtedly work in the short run; however, it does not provide an opportunity for children to practice problem-solving strategies. Over time, the adult continues to bear the primary responsibility for conflict resolution rather than gradually transferring the responsibility to the children.

It is important to consider that mediation takes place where the conflict occurs; the children involved are not removed from the group. As a result, children who are not directly involved in the conflict frequently participate as observers or advisors. The mediation-process teaching that is taking place, affects more children than just those directly involved. Another conflict rarely erupts elsewhere in the room during this time because children become so engrossed in the process.

Denying Children's Legitimate Claims

In the adult's zeal to reach a compromise, they may inadvertently deny a child's legitimate right to maintain possession of a desired object. When this occurs, the focus should shift to helping the child who wants the object to generate appropriate strategies, such as asking, trading or bargaining to achieve their goal. There will also be times when a child uses an acceptable strategy for obtaining the object and the

child in possession refuses to give it up. When this occurs, help the children develop a suitable time frame for the exchange to take place.

Affixing Blame

Sometimes, an adult's first response to hearing a commotion is to say: "OK, who started it?" or "Haven't I told you not to fight?" The children's typical response to these types of questions take the form of denial or accusation, neither of which leads to clarification or constructive problem solving. It is better to approach the conflict saying: "You both seem very upset" or "It looks like both of you want the red hat at the same time." These statements focus on the problem that exists between the children rather than giving sole responsibility to either child.

Taking Sides

In order to establish and be accepted as a mediator, you must be perceived as impartial. For this reason, adults should avoid indicating initial agreement or disagreement with any position. This means avoid nodding, frowning and finger tapping as well as any verbal indications of support, sympathy, dislike or disgust.

Denying the Child's Perspective

There will be times during conflict mediation when a child expresses a point of view that seems ridiculous or untrue. It may be tempting to try and correct the child's perception: "You know you really don't hate Gracie." Or, "You shouldn't be so upset about having to wait your turn." Or, "You should feel pleased that Gracie wants to play with you at all after the way you've been acting." Although any one of these statements may seem accurate to you, they do not correspond to the children's perception of the situation. The result will turn what began as a mutual problem solving opportunity into a fruitless argument. It is your responsibility to practice patience and allow the children to work through their own feelings about the problem being discussed.

Masterminding

A natural reaction is to want to resolve conflicts quickly. Sometimes, to accelerate the mediation process, adults step in with their own solution rather than permitting children to work out the problem themselves. Or, the adult might force children toward a preconceived conclusion. Adults may ask questions such as: "Don't you think ...?" or "Doesn't it seem that you should ...?" or "Wouldn't it be nice if we ...?" If the adult has chosen to initiate the mediation process, they should allow the process to proceed to mutual resolution. Otherwise, children become frustrated at being led to believe they are responsible for reaching a decision when in reality, they must accept the adult's conclusion. In response, the chances for continued conflict are high because children do not feel a real commitment to a resolution that is decided for them. Strategies that force children to do something do not help children practice the problem-solving skills they will need to resolve future disagreements. In addition, using domineering techniques jeopardizes your believability in subsequent attempts to mediate children's conflicts.

Ignoring Ripple Effects

It is normal for adults to center their attention only on the children involved in the dispute and miss the effect the conflict has on the other children in the room. When children fight, it is common for a general sense of tension to spread throughout the group. Children on the fringes of the conflict feel quite relieved when the adult steps in to mediate, and they should be allowed to watch the process as it unfolds. They then have the opportunity to see that disagreements can be resolved in safe, supportive ways. It is important to note that even when a conflict has been settled to the satisfaction of the children directly involved, other children may be reluctant to play with either of them or to enter the area in which the conflict occurred. You can deal with this situation by making an announcement such as: "Gracie and Rachel have figured out a way to share the red hat. They are going to take turns. There is plenty of room in the housekeeping area for other children who would like to play." This announcement provides a signal that the conflict is over and playful interactions may resume.

These are the common pitfalls you need to avoid when teaching conflict negotiation skills. Research showed that when adults first started working on conflict resolution skills, the average resolution took eight minutes and the children generated two solutions. Within four weeks the average resolution took four minutes and five to six solutions were generated. More importantly, as children learn problem-solving procedures and words, they become increasingly capable of solving problems by themselves. These skills will serve them well into adulthood.

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Relationships
Issued March 2005

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