University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Children’s Center

Position on Conflict Management

Our most intense feelings often come from our involvement in conflict. This is also a time when the feelings of others are most prominent. UHMCC looks at conflict incidents as opportunities for learning. Some programs work to reduce conflict as much as possible by issuing a wide range of rules defining what can and cannot be done; controlling the number of children at each center, reducing the amount of child-directed, open-ended activities and reducing overall play time. The problem here is that you need the opportunity to practice a skill repeatedly, and this includes conflict negotiation. Rather than model avoidance, schools ought to model conflict management skills clearly, coherently, and frequently; addressing both the victim and the aggressor. In this way we can develop a civil society in which each person is empowered to help a peer, reduce the incidence of bullying, and create an environment of inclusion and belonging.

Conflict, in preschool and in life, is usually a chain of events. The person crying is often the one who started the chain but things took an unexpected or undesirable turn. We can assist the child by listening, labeling feelings and actions, highlighting cause and effect, and challenging the child to think about how others could feel. “I-messages” are used as a scaffold for expressing these concepts. “Johnny, when you push me I feel angry. I don’t like it, please stop.” The child must state what is wrong, label her feelings, and identify what he wants to happen to resolve the issue. The other person may respond with his or her own “I-message.” “Well Mary, I asked you to move and you wouldn’t so I got frustrated. Please listen to my message.” The back and forth can then go down the chain, but the adult usually has to step in and sum up the situation. “It sounds like you both were not taking care of each other. What do we do now? How can we get our community back on track?” The children must now decide what it will take to resolve the issue and close it. Sometimes it is a group hug, sometimes it is a cup of water, and on rare occasions when the issue is particularly egregious or one or both parties are not letting go of past infractions the teacher may step in and define an activity that will result in a “give-back” to the community (cleaning an easel, weeding a flower box). The goal of this activity is to get the parties to work together in a joint productive activity to rebuild an appropriate working relationship.

Just because the children have spoken does not necessarily mean the process is over. The adult may need to take the aggressor off to one side to figure out how a more appropriate way of addressing an issue. “Using your words,” does not really cover it. What words? What if the person will not listen? Also victims may need to work out forgiveness skills. Things may not be resolved to their satisfaction so they may hang on to the incident, sometimes for several days. The habit of reflecting on a situation and thinking about different strategies to handle things is important. While we recognize behavior is very hard to change, we are looking down the long road toward a more effective citizen throughout the rest of their lives.

In general, we ask the children to seek help if their words are not working. For the younger children, they will be directed to get a teacher. For the older children we begin to direct them to their peers. It cuts down on the tattling because children don’t tolerate
tattling to each other. Also, by getting in the habit of looking to peers for support we are attempting to lay a foundational practice for dealing with bullying as the child gets older.

**What It Looks Like By Age**

**Age 2 to 3**
In the beginning children are so egocentric that they are often more focused on objects to play with rather than people. It can almost seem like they think the object is floating through the air rather than being carried by a peer, and therefore available to be plucked away and used for their own purposes. At this age level our focus is on recognizing that not everything can be claimed as “mine.” We also work on labeling feelings and understanding that living and non-living things must be treated differently. Intervention in conflict is often immediate and an attempt is made to get the aggressor to look at signs of discomfort in the victim and begin to think about how the other person feels.

**Age 3 to 4**
At this stage peer engagement is much higher, and personal boundaries are beginning to be set. Conflict takes on new layers as they work with concepts of justice, sharing and basic communication skills. Conflict processes may become ritualized, but we try to encourage a level of authenticity. For this reason we do not require an apology if they really don’t mean it. We do ask them to fix a mistake but this may be in a very concrete way, like comforting a friend a cup of water, or giving a hug to reinforce a sense of inclusion. There may be more of a lag in teacher response to conflict to give the children a chance to work things out for themselves. Adults may also follow up with children after conflict resolution to compliment independent resolution, encourage inclusion, or remind children of commitments to others (like sharing or refraining from teasing).

**Age 4 to 5**
Our goals for this age level focus on collaboration and independent learning. For these reasons we tend to put quite a lag on adult conflict intervention. Children will often come tattle on others, and the adults need to assess the situation to see if intervention is truly warranted or if observation is better. There are three reasons for this. First, children at this age level are far more aware of the people around them and will often change behavior if they know an adult is watching. Second, children still need time to work things out in their own way. They may come up with solutions that are perfectly acceptable to them though solutions may defy adult logic. Finally, we want to encourage peer mediation. This may be in the form of a weekly “counselor” job in which everyone is directed to a specific individual, or we may charge everyone with the task. Personal boundaries are clarified, and we assist children understanding theirs and how they may differ from peers.

**Mixed Age**
In a mixed-age classroom we generally ask the older children to help the younger children figure things out. This Big Brother/Big Sister format helps the older child to practice skills while allowing the younger child the space to work at his or her own level.

**Suggested Reading**
- *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* by Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp
- *Education for a Civil Society* by Dan Gartrell

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