

Keeping the Peace: Helping Children Resolve Conflict Through a Problem-Solving Approach

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Conflict, Peace, and Problems: these concepts confuse and confound us for most of our lives. They influence our thoughts and feelings and lie at the core of our attitudes, values, and beliefs. By the very nature of our humanness we confront these issues on a daily basis, in our personal lives and on global scale. Our mental and physical health depends on how well we learn to cope with conflict, how we solve problems, and how we practice peace.

As parents and teachers we model the behaviors that our children learn. In the classroom and at home, we are the leaders who create and manage the optimum environment for growth. We must be the authority without being the authoritarian. It is a heavy responsibility. In shaping future generations, we shape the future of the world. If we are to make changes in society, it must happen in the place where one generation begets another: in the parent-child and teacher-student relationships.

Montessori understood this truth with a clarity unsurpassed by most. Her view and description of the world in 1932 rings hauntingly true in 1991. In *Education and Peace* (1972), she argued that the very concept of peace was not even defined, much less understood. While the science of war was studied by every nation on the earth, no formal study of peace existed in any corner of the globe. Even today it is the rare university which offers a program in peace studies. The War College has been in existence for some time in this country, yet there is still on Peace College. No nation research is funded to study the dynamics of peace, yet billions are spent on weapons research and the buildup of military armaments. Montessori indicated clearly that only through scientific research could the underlying and hidden causes of war be revealed and true peace begun.

Only human beings wage war against one another. We wage "war" on the homefront, as well as the global front. We have only to witness the tremendous rise in family violence to understand how it filters into our classrooms, cities, countries, and the world. Clearly then, it is human beings who must be studied.

The crux of the question of peace and war thus no longer lies in the need to give people the material weapons to defend the geographical frontiers separating nation from nation, for the real first line of defense against war is humankind itself, and where humans are socially disorganized and devalued, the universal enemy will enter the breach (Montessori, 1932).

A true social reformer, Montessori (1932) spoke passionately for the cause of peace through education: "Preventing conflicts is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of

education." She saw the child as the hope for building a peaceful, more harmonious world. As yet unspoiled, the child is capable of unfolding along an inner path directed by her own spirituality. As Aline Wolf (1989) has beautifully paraphrased in her book *Peaceful Children, Peaceful World*, "Truly upon the spiritual growth of the child depend the health or sickness of the soul, the strength or weakness of the character, the clearness or obscurity of the intellect. The nurturing of this spiritual life finds its expression both within the family and at school in what is still called education." If education truly meets the needs of the child and contributes to his or her development as a full human being, then there remains hope for a better world.

Indeed, it is a lofty and noble goal; but how do you put words into action? How do you apply the principle? Montessori detailed many, many ways to educate the child in the specific content of academic areas. Yet, the underlying theme of all her lessons was the connectedness and interdependence of human being to another, one culture to another, one species to another. The essence of her work was spiritually based and sought to nurture that spirituality in each child.

At first glance it all seems so ethereal, and to the teacher struggling with children in conflict in the classroom it becomes a heavy task. More than once I have seen dedicated, sincere teachers, besieged by dysfunctional conflict in the classroom, turn away from the field altogether. More and more, children model the violence they see all around them and teachers feel helpless about how to turn it around. The task seems overwhelming and the needs are so great.

Montessori did not leave a detailed series of lessons on how to deal constructively with the inevitability of conflict, the promise of peace, or the steps in problem solving. Yet these are the very tools necessary for giving children (and adults) the means to create a lasting and just peace, both in the world and within. There *are* techniques that any teacher can learn and transmit to children, even the youngest children.

Over the last 15 years as a Montessorian and educator of children and adults, I have studied a variety of approaches and techniques used in a multitude of disciplines. Many of these skills can simply be called basic life skills. I have found that this curriculum is crucial to development of the whole child and to the hope of building a new society. If we are to nurture the child's spirit as well as educate the intellect, then every teacher must be as versed in teaching conflict resolution, problem-solving, and peace studies as in teaching the "45 layout" with the golden beads, or any other academic lesson considered standard Montessori material. These important human skills are the other side of the coin and cannot be

overlooked. They must be presented in the same systematic and patient way that math or language is presented to the child. They must be part of the daily curriculum. A base must be built in the early years, and construction must continue throughout the child's education.

There are many starting places, but I have found that there are several important components or "anchors" to this program of study. As in all human growth and development, we start with the individual and move toward others. Using this orientation and *preskills* for conflict resolution can be grouped under four major areas of themes: *Accepting Self*, *Accepting Others*, *Communicating Effectively*, and the *Problem-Solving Process*. These areas can be addressed at each level of development, beginning with the toddlers.

Accepting Self Affirmation

Good self-esteem is the foundation upon which the healthy personality is built. The child who feels s/he is truly lovable will find it much easier to move beyond the needs of self into the realm of contribution to and interaction with others. In other words, I must love myself before I can truly love others, and I learn to love myself by being loved by others. In that nurturing or affirming process the circle is completed.

Physical Affirmations. We affirm children in many ways every day. A smile, a nod, a touch on the arm, or an arm around the shoulder all show the child that s/he is valued and cared about. Positive human touch is a powerful tool and should not be given up because of today's fears of misinterpretation. Without the human touch children literally wither and die.

Creating an Atmosphere of Affirmation.

Verbal and written affirmations can be part of any classroom and any home. It is important for the parent or teacher to model the behavior and to structure activities that encourage the process. Affirming means acknowledging and appreciating the positive and admirable qualities and abilities in others. An attitude of affirmation creates an atmosphere of affirmation where individuals can feel safe, accepted, and loved. In the kind of atmosphere we dare to risk, to make mistakes, and to grow. In this kind of atmosphere we are more willing to see someone else's perspective, to see that even though we are in conflict, there is good in you, too, and that perhaps we can work out this problem.

Encouragement is a soothing salve to bruised or frightened egos. Telling people how much we appreciate the work they do, or the ideas they express, is tantamount to building a positive sense of self and a confidence in one's abilities. The atmosphere of affirmation is steeped in phrases like, "Ryan, I really appreciate the job you did

cleaning these desks. It makes things so much nicer for all of us when we can go back to our work after lunch with clean desks.” Or, “Jason, I really admire the self-control it took for you to let Michael be first in line today. I know it was hard work.” As we work with each child, we learn their strengths and weaknesses. We observe the particular issues they are struggling with and we offer them additional support with words of encouragement.

Affirmation Activities. Affirmation activities must be thoughtfully chosen and directed with each person in mind. The teacher should consider the goal of the activity, level of trust in the group, level of expression, age appropriateness, and his or her own level of comfort with the task, according to Stephanie Judson (1977), compiler and editor of *A Manual on Nonviolence and Children*. She suggests that affirmation activities be part of every opening and closing circle and, over the years, I have found this to be amazingly effective in creating an atmosphere of trust and caring. It also reinforces the expectation that here, at least, we will treat each other with genuine respect and concern.

In some groups the high level of trust has allowed children the safety to confront one another with the real issues in their lives and allowed them the space to work through doubts and fears or to recognize when change was needed. In this sense the group itself becomes almost therapeutic.

At the beginning of the year, when children are just getting to know each other, name games area an ideal way to open communication and establish a positive regard for all. Judson suggests numerous games, but the ones I have found most effective allow children to tell about themselves in a variety of ways. Each child always seems to enjoy choosing “an animal that is most like you.” The child can write or draw the animal on a nametag and then tell the group what characteristics of the animal apply. Hearing about the animals, flowers, tress, or even inanimate objects that children choose gives the teacher great insight into each child’s self-view. Children also like to tell what they have accomplished in a day or what they are proud of doing. They willingly share their goals and what they feel good about.

Once they are comfortable talking about themselves, children can begin to affirm the others in the group. An initial exercise I’ve used is having the children introduce each other to the group by putting an arm around a friend and stating, “This is my friend ___, and he’s really good at reading and helping the younger children, (etc.).” If children do not know each other well, you can preface this activity with a “pairs” exercise in which children interview each other for specific information (their favorite color, work, time of year, etc.). I usually give three questions and tailor them to the specific group, purpose of the activity, and themes we may be studying in class.

Holidays and birthdays are ideal times to focus on affirmation activities. Every child loves celebrating a birthday. This is the perfect opportunity for the group to affirm the individual child and can be expanded into a language arts experience, as well. In our class we celebrate birthdays and several projects:

- Children bring items from home that represent something special in their lives – one for every year they are old (e.g., favorite books, vacation souvenir, special stuffed animal, family photo, etc.; I generally discourage them from bringing just toys). In a large gathering they present each item and tell about its significance in their lives, while I record a phrase or sentence about it on sentence strips. Later the strips are posted in the classroom with the child’s picture.
- A birthday story is then written about the child by each member of the class. The sentence strips are used as a reference, but children are encouraged to be as creative as possible in their stories (or poems) and tell about their own relationship with the birthday child. Story paper with space for illustrations is used, then mounted on colored paper, laminated, and bound into a book which remains in the classrooms for all to read. At the end of the year each child takes home his or her very own book and can treasure it for years. It becomes part of the child’s personal history and serves as a reference for feeling good.
- To make the cover of the birthday book, I ask all the children, in a group lesson, to say something about the birthday child that is affirming and positive. They can say what they like best, admire, or appreciate about the child, what they enjoy doing with the child, or what they might wish for the child. These positive statements are then recorded on a special symbol which will serve as the book cover, such as a star, a tracing of the child’s hand or foot, a silhouette of the head, or large cutout of the first letter in the name. With younger children, adding a full-body silhouette can serve as a historical record of height and size.

Similar activities can be structured around holidays, as well. For gift-giving holidays and Valentine’s Day, in particular, the children choose a “secret” person and are encouraged to leave special notes or handmade gifts inside their special person’s desk or cubby. Identities are revealed in a large group ceremony amidst lots of guessing, laughter, and hugs.

Relaxation

When children feel relaxed and safe, they are more likely to flourish and grow by daring to risk. Many children find it very difficult to relax, some by the nature of their temperament and others because of the stress in their daily lives. Structuring relaxation exercises for use in the classroom provides children with a way to learn and practice this lifelong skill.

After recess or outdoor playtime seems to be an ideal moment for centering and calming down. Some beginning lessons on the nature of stress and relaxation are generally useful and provide a starting point. To demonstrate tension and relaxing, have the children make a tight fist and hold it for several seconds, then let go. Discuss together what it feels like and how it relates to other areas in their lives. Later they can imagine that their muscles are clay or jello; when an arm or leg is picked up by the teacher, they simply go limp. It becomes a contest to see who can be most like a jellyfish!

Breathing is central to relaxing, and many an angry child can be calmed by the task of getting control of his breathing. Visualizations are very helpful in demonstrating deep breathing. I often tell the children to imagine a wave rolling in as they breathe in through their noses. The wave washes over them and then gently rolls back out to sea, as they slowly breathe out through their mouths.

In order to sustain the period of relaxation, an imaginary journey can be taken. As children relax on the floor and close their eyes they can be encouraged to “visit” a place where they are totally relaxed. This also makes for interesting writing material. I have often taken the children on “trips” that tie into whatever we happen to be studying at the time. If we are talking about the solar system, we journey to some distant planet and create whatever kind of scene that allows us to be happy and relaxed. We’ve journeyed through time, space, and dimension. Sometimes we journey within ourselves and walk through the ear, the respiratory or circulatory system, etc. Often these are expanded into written stories.

Identifying and Labeling Emotions

Understanding and identifying emotions in self and others is paramount in the problem-solving and conflict resolution process. Young children need to be given the language for their inner life, just as they are given the language for the world outside themselves. In *Genesis*, Adam and Eve were given control over their world by naming the plants and animals. Naming is also a popular theme in many fairytales and myths. We give children the power and control over their emotional world when they are able to name it. Picture cards, badges, and role-plays are just a few way to teach children the labels for how they feel. They need to recognize the outward signs of their feelings in others, as well, and many large-group demonstrations can take place to illustrate these concepts. Of course, there are many excellent books to serve as illustrations and points of departure for discussion.

Expressing Emotions Appropriately

Children need to understand that everyone has feelings. They’re neither right nor wrong, they simply are. What we do with our feelings is another matter. We need to recognize what we are feeling and why, then we can decide what to do about it. The way we *express* our feelings is a learned behavior.

Aggression, the intent to harm another, occurs as a result of an excited emotional state – usually (but not always) anger or frustration, and the perception of threat. However, recent studies have shown clearly that aggression, too, is a learned behavior. Children learn to be aggressive by modeling the behavior they see in others, being rewarded for it, and perceiving aggressors as successful (Bandura, 1973).

We can learn to express our feelings (both positive and negative) appropriately, and we can learn when and how to let go of them. Research cited by Kreidler (1984) indicates that the most effective method for releasing angry and aggressive feelings is either to express them directly to the one who triggered them or to cool off and let the hostility dissipate. Distraction and humor are useful methods for cooling off, and children can be taught various methods for accomplishing that goal. Children can be encouraged to write a “bug” list of things that

annoy or anger them, and then they can be challenged to find appropriate ways of expressing those feelings. Visualization and guided imagery are useful techniques in helping children to think about how they feel, why they feel that way, and what they can do about it. Creative movement activities can also be incorporated into practicing appropriate emotional expression. Teachers can create distraction corners where a child can go to distract himself until he feels more in control or do a distraction “dance” in order to help the feelings dissipate (Kreidler, 1984).

Accepting Others Perspective-Taking

Perspective-taking is a preskill necessary for any real communication, problem-solving, or conflict resolution. Seeing someone else’s point of view is a difficult task, even for adults. We struggle with it all our lives. If I feel secure within myself and confident in my abilities, however, I will be much more willing to let go of my own ego long enough to see someone else’s perspective on any given issue or conflict.

A wonderful way to illustrate varying perspectives is to use optical illusions that can be seen in two different ways. It is important that individuals spend enough time with the illustration to see both views. The classic story of the six blind men and the elephant is another way to introduce this idea through literature. Perspective-taking can also be made concrete for younger children by placing cutouts of footprints on the floor in different areas of the classroom. Ask children to stand on each set and tell what they see from that position. This can lead into a discussion of how I can see a situation one way, but my friend can see it very differently. With older children this can actually lead into an exploration of varying temperaments among people and how different temperaments take in information and then judge that information based on their own particular “filters” or values.

Diversity and Tolerance

What we don’t know or understand, we often fear; and what we fear, we often despise. In “Creative Conflict Resolution,” Kreidler (1984) points out that teaching *tolerance* is linked to building self-esteem and self-confidence in the individual and positive exposure to diversity. Direct and cooperative contact with diverse groups is the foundation upon which tolerance is built. Invite members from other cultures into the classroom and design a project where children can be *actively* involved with those who are different from themselves. One small way we try to achieve tolerance and understanding is to have our “city campus” children join our “country campus” children for a special Thanksgiving Day celebration each year. Both groups plan and execute part of the celebration and share their efforts with each other. This concept is expanded in the elementary class when we visit and from long-term relationships with the elderly in a local nursing home. Opportunities to work with people with disabilities or diverse cultural backgrounds will open the door to understanding on all sides. Different groups of children will have different “blind spots,” and teachers must be creative in identifying and working with these areas of possible or real prejudice.

In the classroom it is important to show the children that you value diversity. Point out the differences among each other in your own group

of children and make an effort to reinforce each person’s different contribution to the classroom community. Schools are generally places where academic achievements are valued more than artistic, physical, or social skills. Young children will usually respect and admire the “smart” ones, but may need help in understanding that everyone has special gifts and should be appreciated for them. Giving children choices and using open-ended activities also encourages tolerance and reinforces the idea that there is always more than one way or one right answer.

Various biases and prejudices can be analyzed in literature. Fairytales, for example, often portray the person with a disability as evil or stupid. Prejudices against sex, religion, and culture can also be explored. Children need to learn the language of diversity. Activities can be structured to create an awareness and respect for differences and similarities in family members and class members as a starting place. Exploring cultural diversity connects directly with the Montessori Geography curriculum, and many creative activities have been developed by Montessorians throughout the years.

Cooperation and Community Building

Sharing and working together is a major task for children. It becomes even more difficult in a society such as ours, where competition rather than cooperation is reinforced and applauded. Winning at any cost seems to be the motto, and it takes great effort to reverse that trend in the classroom. Cooperation can be encouraged and taught by allowing children the opportunity to take part in cooperative games, cooperative activities, and cooperative learning projects.

Cooperative Games. Often familiar games such as musical chairs or king-of-the-hill can be modified so that children must cooperate rather than compete. Rather than having one winner and the rest losers, these games can be altered to require that children work toward everyone “winning.” Using this orientation, in king-of-the-hill everyone has to be able to fit on the “hill.” A good cooperative game includes three major points: everyone wins, everyone gets to play, and the group is challenged to work together (Kreidler, 1984).

Cooperative Activities. A Cooperative activity is designed specifically for the purpose of teaching children to work together. These are *process* activities and have little to do with specific subject matter. Removing the academic content allows children to focus on the group process skills rather than getting the “right” answer. It is usually best to start with groups of two, and then add to the size of the group as the children progress. If difficulties or conflicts occur within the group, they can be resolved with an emphasis on the positive benefits, then redirect to the task at hand. It is important to remember that learning to cooperate requires practice and time.

Activities centered on creating an art project lend themselves well to cooperative activities. Children can create murals, totem poles, craft-stick pictures or projects, aliens, etc. Kreidler (1984) outlines two basic ground rules: (1) Decisions are made by everyone; and (2) Construction of the project involves everyone’s help. Children can also be given a specific task, such as constructing a specific geometric shape from given puzzle pieces, making sentences out of a given word series, solving a mystery, choosing

items to take to a desert island or an alien planet, etc.

Cooperative Learning Projects. Cooperative learning has become widely recognized as an effective tool for enhancing cooperation among students, reducing conflicts, and improving relationships, as well as teaching academic content. This can take many forms and cover any area of the basic curriculum. Students can be divided into groups to study the various geologic eras, ancient civilizations, continents and cultures, scientific theory, animal or plant groups. The basic idea is for each group to work cooperatively in order to research, write, and present the information back to the large group or to solve a problem. The concept can be applied to any subject area and evaluation should take place as usual. If students are used to working together, they won’t need to focus as heavily on the process of cooperating, but may need only to be refreshed, from time to time. Groups can be challenged to chart, sequence, and assess their own progress throughout the project.

Community Building. Special projects can be designed to enhance community within the classroom. Cooking projects, holiday celebrations, gardening projects, community service projects, and camping are some of the ways I have tried to build community within my own group. All decisions are made by the group and we work for consensus. Regular class meetings are held and work is done by committees. All of these areas are fun and practical. Learning is *applied* both academically and social-emotionally.

Communicating Effectively

Communication is the process by which we relate to one another. It is both an art and a skill. Conflicts can be escalated or de-escalated depending on the quality of the communication between disputants. Effective communication can be learned and practiced in any classroom. At first glance it seems to be a relatively simple process: a message is sent and then received. Children can be challenged to explore this process in depth, in order to find out why it so often breaks down.

Perceptions, fears, insecurities, and decoding mistakes are but a few of the contributors to the breakdown of communication. Children also need to understand that communication takes place on two levels: it is both verbal and nonverbal. Role-plays can be designed to illustrate these concepts and children can be encouraged to identify the problems through discussion and experience. Children can be taught the specific skills needed for effective listening and speaking as readily as they are taught the sounds of the alphabet or numbers in base ten.

Listening Skills

Attending Behaviors. Before real listening can happen children must be able to “attend.” Good eye-contact, body positioning, delaying judgment, and dealing with silence are but a few of the skills they need in order to become highly effective listeners. I begin by teaching children to maintain eye-contact with “the wink game.” To dismiss children from the circle I simply wink at them. This requires them to maintain focus on my eyes and it is done in complete silence. The older children in my class devised the “chain wink.” In this version the teacher begins by winking at one child, but the wink is then passed on by the child to another, and so on. This requires that the children pay close attention to one another and

that they maintain attention long enough to follow the sequence. Children can also be led to observe more accurately and to understand perception through various games.

Active Listening. May of the tolls developed by Thomas Gordon (1976) for his "Parent Effectiveness Training" are beneficial to both adults and children. Active listening, used when the speaker is expressing strong emotion, allows the person to feel really heard and understood. The listener simply reflects back verbally to the speaker both the feelings and content of the message received. We offer feedback, a mirror in which the person can clearly see herself. This process of reflecting feelings and clarifying thoughts helps lay the foundation for decision-making and problem-solving.

Many group games can be structured to practice this skill. Children can be given a specific question, such as, "Should we have homework?" Why or Why Not?" Each person then tells how he thinks and feels about it, but before the next person answers, she must turn to the previous speaker and reflect back his message. The group monitors for accuracy. I usually urge children to listen first for feelings; then we add content. The general formula used to teach active or reflective listening is, "You feel ____ because ____." This seems somewhat artificial at first, but it helps to have a beginning place. Additional use of verbal and nonverbal techniques can be taught as children become more proficient. It is important to remind them not to interrupt, offer advice, or give suggestions when they are doing active listening. This basic life skill is effectively taught to parents, counselors, teachers, and managers alike. It is essential in resolving conflicts, solving problems, and developing good relationships.

Defensive vs. Supportive Communication. Transmitting messages clearly and accurately is essential for good communication. Children can learn to avoid stimulating defensive behavior in others by understanding how important it is to describe rather than condemn, to give information rather than judge, and to tell how they feel rather than accuse. They need to recognize the *barriers* to communication. Group experiences and role-plays are excellent ways to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of criticizing, name calling, diagnosing, or praising evaluatively. They can be led to understand that sending solutions by ordering, threatening, moralizing, advising, or asking in appropriate questions closes the door on real communication. Dominating the communication and avoiding the other person's concerns by diverting, arguing, or even reassuring also blocks communication and creates a defensive posture in the listener.

I-Statements. Children need to be given the tools to express themselves when they want to communicate a concern, a problem, or their own feelings about an issue. I-statements or messages (Gordon, 1976) are highly effective in this area. They are facilitative and explain the problem. I-statements allow us to express our feelings in a nondefensive way. They are specific and enable us to let others know the effect that their behavior has on us without putting them down. In an I-message the nonverbal elements, such as tone of voice and body posture, are crucial. I-messages require a nonjudgmental attitude. When used effectively, they allow communication to remain open even though the issues may be difficult.

Problems can be understood clearly and resolutions can be found without anyone feeling like a loser.

An I-statement refers to three elements of a situation: feeling, behavior, and consequence. Here again I use a simple formula to teach children the basic idea. This is extremely helpful when children are feeling angry and conflicts erupt. They can express their feelings and ask for change in a way that does not demean or put down the other child. Children learn to state, "I feel ____ when you (do X), because (it has this concrete effect)."
They can learn to state what they want, what they feel, and what they like. Teachers and parents, too, are well advised to use I-statements when dealing with difficult behavior. A child who can state, "I feel really angry when you keep interrupting me, because I can't concentrate on my work" is much more likely to be effective than saying, "Get away, you're bothering me!" This technique can be taught in group lessons or in pairs, using given situations or examples from the classroom. Role-plays, again, are a favorite among the children. Scripts can be written. And role *reversals* are helpful when certain children may benefit from experiencing the problem from the other side.

Problem-Solving Skills

The problem-solving approach is a positive, hopeful response to difficult situations. Rather than allowing children (and adults) to wallow in the perception that problems are always negative and to be avoided at all costs and "woe is me, plagued by all these difficulties," we realistically embrace problems as opportunities for growth. Life is a series of problems and we are challenged to find creative and dynamic ways of solving them. When we accept this dramatic shift in attitude, we are freed from the burdens of negativity and self-pity. We are able to turn our energies toward productive and creative work. We can actually *enjoy* solving problems! In the same way that the child who has just learned to build the pink tower, tie shoes, or multiply repeats the task over and over, we approach each new problem with an air of confidence, with a belief that "I can do it" and doesn't it feel great.

Problem-Solving Process

There are many models for teaching problem-solving, but the basic sequence I have found to be most useful follows six steps:

1. Define or identify the problem (ask: What is the problem?)
2. Brainstorm solutions (ask: How can it be solved?)
3. Pair the consequences (ask: What will happen if...?)
4. Choose the best solution (ask: Which solution will work best?).
5. Implement the solution (means: DO IT!)
6. Evaluate the solution (ask: Did it work?)

This basic process can be taught in a variety of ways and applied to almost anything. Numerous skills are involved at each level, and it may be advantageous to concentrate on each step in a series of lessons. In order to become skilled problem-solvers children must learn to observe; identify problem ownership; be creative; do consequential, if-then thinking; make decisions; act on decisions; and critically evaluate. The use of role-plays, role reversals, puppets, bibliotherapy, and group analysis are but a few of the ways these skills can be taught. Problems can be analyzed in literature, history, science,

geography, etc. Children can easily be challenged to identify the problem-solving sequence in any given story or fairytale, then be asked to rewrite the story using their own solutions. Historic events can be rewritten, as well.

Applications and Extensions to Classroom Conflicts

Classroom Problems. It is important for the children to take direct ownership of their own problems and responsibility for solving them. Any classroom problem can be brought to the group for analysis and resolution. In my class this year the children were concerned about pencils disappearing. In a class meeting we discussed the problem at length and numerous solutions were proposed by the children, listed, then reviewed for practicality, specificity, and fairness or balance. Consensus was reached and the decision was made to work at another person's desk only with his or her permission. After a week the solution was evaluated. It had not been completely effective, so they decided to try another solution. This time names would be put on personal pencils and the classroom pencils would also be labeled, with the understanding that all pencils would be returned to their rightful owners. This second solution was again evaluated at the following meeting and everyone agreed that it was working. When children are given the time to work through these kinds of problems, they are much more able to solve problems created by conflicts with others.

Resolution of Conflict. The problem-solving approach applied to resolving conflicts must allow each person to "win." All parties must agree to the solution. This philosophic orientation empowers and respects the needs of each person. Everyone is treated fairly.

Children who understand the problem-solving process can solve their own conflicts, but I have found that in the beginning, a mediator is often required. With preprimary children in particular, the adult (teacher or parent) must be the bridge. As a mediator, the adult's goal is to model the *process* but allow the children to find their own solutions.

Draining Off Emotions. When conflicts erupt, emotions run high. Children are usually frustrated, angry, and hurt. Clear thinking is virtually impossible when we are engulfed by overwhelming waves of emotion; therefore, the adult's first task is to validate each child's feelings and allow them to "drain off" the emotions. The adult must employ keen active listening at this stage. Remember that the message may be stated quite "loudly" in the nonverbal body language only. Reflecting it with "I can see that you're really at Josh by the way you stamp your feet, Alice. Can you tell me about it?" acknowledges the feelings and opens the door to discussion.

Finding the Facts. Of course, conflicts may occur just as the adult has looked the other way, so it is important to find the facts in order to help the children define the problem(s). Each disputant is asked, "What happened?" and then encouraged to tell his/her "story" and feelings about it. Interrupting is *not* allowed. Often the mediator must restate the facts back to the other parties: "Jason is saying that he felt very hurt when you called him a jerk, Michael, and that's why he scribbled on your picture."

Identifying and Exploring Problem Ownership. Problem ownership is a key issue in any conflict resolution. Each party must be willing

to take ownership of his or her role in creating or contributing to the problem. Some children have real difficulty understanding how their own behavior is linked to the current problem they may be experiencing. The mediator must lead them through the process of recognizing and ultimately accepting the consequences of their actions. With practice the children can be challenged to state the problem as the other person sees it. “So Michael, how do you think Jason sees the problem?”

In this stage the teacher or parent can often recognize patterns of behavior and the roles that children play; e.g., Michael generally provokes but then feels victimized when the insulted one retaliates. Other techniques can be used to help children explore these patterns in depth.

Young children often have difficulty, “using words” to express themselves and will behave inappropriately. In essence they must “find another way to say it.” A typical example can be found in the child who wants to get the attention of a peer in order to establish friendship, but pushes or grabs instead of stroking or asking. Sometimes the mediator must ask, “What were you trying to say/do/express?” and then help the child “use words” instead of fists.

Brainstorming Solutions. Once the problem has been correctly identified, the children are asked to consider “What else could you do?” in order to find a solution to the problem. The mediator must remember to elicit a *variety* of possibilities from each disputant. Children will often respond with the answer they think you want to hear, which is usually “Talk about it.” They must be challenged to use their imagination, and at this point no solution is judged or considered outrageous. The goal is for children to recognize that there is *always* more than one way to solve a problem. The mediator can encourage creative thinking by posing the question “What else could you do?” until alternative solutions are discovered. All possibilities should be exhausted.

Specific activities can be designed to encourage creative thinking. A simple group exercise or game I’ve found effective involves asking the children to list as many ways as possible to use a pencil, cup, or any other such object. A time limit is usually set, and the children race to think of as many possibilities as quickly as they can. This activity is a lot of fun and children will giggle with absolute delight when everyone gets to share his or her ideas.

Parenting Consequences. Critical thinking and judgment are necessary at this point in the process. Each solution must be evaluated logically. In the harsh light of reality we ask, “What will happen if...?” The mediator’s role is to help the children see the logical consequences of their actions. If then questions are posed: “If you act out your anger and hit Jeremy, what will probably happen?” Through this process the children search for a realistic solution, one *each* of them can live with and commit to doing.

Some discussion on what makes a good resolution may be necessary. The children must evaluate each solution by asking: Is the solution specific enough? Will it really solve the problem? Will follow-through be possible? Will it prevent the problem from happening again? Is the responsibility for making it work shared by both (all) disputants?

Deciding on a Mutually Acceptable Solution. The solution(s) that meet the above criteria may then be deemed the best possibility. Each disputant must choose what he or she is willing to do to solve the problem. Sometimes the solution has several parts. The mediator may need to restate what each person has agreed to do: “The next time Michael wants to work with Jason, he has agreed to ask for Jason’s permission before he puts his material on Jason’s mat and Jason has agreed to let Michael work with him on projects that require more than one person.” At times it may be appropriate to role-play on the spot: the children are encouraged to act out exactly what they will do or say the next time a similar situation develops. This kind of rehearsal allows the child to practice the behavior and gain confidence in his/her ability to exercise control in the situation.

Making a Plan to Implement the Solution. Often the mediator must assist the children in developing a plan for implementing the solution. If the solution is to happen in the future, the mediator must ask, “When will you ___?” or “How can we help you to ___?” Children will generally be forthcoming in their requests for help. At this point they need to organize for action.

Implementing the Solution. Implementing the solution means DOING IT! All talk and no action is useless and only creates frustration, distrust, and more problems. Mediators assist the children in acting on their good intentions as much as possible, but in reality *only the children can actually do it*. Sometimes they need to be reminded of this crucial fact.

Evaluating the Solution. Finally, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of the solution after it has been implemented. All parties must ask, “Did it work?” If not, it’s back to the drawing board! Children sometimes discover than Plan A doesn’t work and Plan B might be more effective. If the solution didn’t work, it should be analyzed for the reasons why it didn’t work. In this way the same mistake is avoided in the future.

Peer Mediation

After children have experienced the resolution process many times, they will often spontaneously *mediate for each other*. Sometime it is useful to ask certain children to act as mediators, and in some situations specially chosen children are trained for the job. In my work with the National Center for Human Development at Sheppard Pratt, I have recently trained a selected group of elementary children in a Baltimore City School to act as mediators or “conflict managers” on their playground. Children were trained in the basic communication and problem-solving skills during special classes which met twice a week for about 8 weeks. They were taught the mediation process using a four-step plan. This program, as well as numerous others throughout the country, has been highly successful in reducing the numbers of conflicts, office referrals, and suspensions, as well as increasing attendance rates. Student mediators gain many personal benefits, and the overall school environment is dramatically improved.

Exploring the Concepts

Every human being desires a peaceful environment. What that looks like varies greatly from one individual to another. Children need the safety and security of “peace” in order to develop their own potential fully. When they are able to explore the concepts of peace, conflict, and the reality of problems, children can begin to develop their own personal definitions. When children begin to see the positive aspects of conflict, they no longer need to be afraid of it. Once they can visualize peace they can begin the work of establishing peace. They can begin to examine their own attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. Peace and harmony can become real in their lives. They can become powerful people who are capable of making good decision and controlling their own lives. As parents and teachers we are privileged to assist them in this dynamic process.

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