



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

RESOLVING CONFLICTS AND MAKING PEACE: BASIC SKILLS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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A peaceful, civil society is created by individuals who know how to share, to compromise, to work through differences of opinion in a peaceful manner, to hear different viewpoints, to articulate needs and opinions in a way that others can hear them. These abilities do not emerge magically in the absence of violent struggle. They are learned, practiced, and made real through positive daily interactions. Most important: they are learned right from the beginning, as part of a young child's developing identity.

Thus it makes sense that peacemaking behaviors and the skills to resolve conflicts should be incorporated into efforts to support children, even very young children, in their development. As NGOs and governments work together to develop programmes that support integrated early childhood development, conflict-resolution strategies can be incorporated as a powerful tool to help facilitate the healing of both individuals and communities that have been shattered by violence.

Conflict Resolution and Peacemaking

When adults have lived in situations characterized by violence, distrust, hatred, danger, and repression, they do not easily return to cooperation, trust, self-confidence, and creative problemsolving (assuming they have ever experienced these behaviors). The children living with these adults in difficult situations cannot necessarily find the supports or role models they need in order to develop the fundamental trust and self-confidence that are the basis for cooperation and peaceful, creative problem-solving. Conflict resolution and peacemaking strategies are efforts designed to help adults and children to (re)establish:

- a sense of safety
- a positive sense of self
- a sense that they can have a positive effect on their community
- the ability to express feelings and distress in creative, non-violent ways
- the ability to act peacefully
- a willingness to cooperate
- an understanding of how to solve problems constructively
- a sense of membership in their group, culture, community
- an ability to recognize their own contributions and others' contributions to the creation of community.

Creating an Environment for Conflict Resolution and Peacemaking Among Young Children

The early years are an ideal time to help children establish a basis for a lifetime of constructive participation in their culture and society. Within the first six years of life:

- children learn the basics of human behavior
- they are highly influenced by the values, expectations, attitudes, traditions and culture that are transmitted in their environment
- they are socialized as they become aware of themselves as individuals and the people around them, as well as their roles and relationships

The holistic development of the young child requires environments in which children

- can feel secure
- are encouraged to explore
- have opportunities to experiment
- are able to play
- can question and posit ideas
- can symbolize

in an interactive and supportive caregiving relationship. All of these dimensions of the environment help children to develop the self-confidence and flexibility to learn peaceful constructive behaviors.

Children are active learners. They construct their understanding of the world and their knowledge through repeated interactions with people and with the materials in their environment. Thus the groundwork for a lifetime of conflict resolution is laid by creating healthy and positive interactions for children with their environment.

Children are also active communicators. They are able to display a wide range of emotional expressions from birth. Thus, activities that allow children to express themselves, through music, dance, words, actions, are all fruitful. They can help children to express difficult feelings arising from living in difficult circumstances, sort out their experiences, and find constructive ways of acting and communicating.

It is critical to address children's psychosocial needs in the first years of their life. If these needs are not met, which is often the case when children are growing up in a conflict situation, children find it hard to gain a sense of their role in the social order of society. The youths and adults around them are often struggling with the same issues—clearly all levels of society are deeply affected. Therefore, in projects designed to support young children and their families, it is invaluable to integrate ways to help young children to process their past and present experiences in life.

Developing Appropriate Strategies for Conflict Resolution and Peacemaking

The most effective approaches to conflict resolution with young children include materials and resources that are:

- developmentally and culturally appropriate
- closely related to the experiences of the child within her or his community
- based on the specific needs and resources of the community
- based on indigenous methods of conflict resolution
- built on young children's interests
- interactive
- multi-sensory
- multi-disciplinary
- integrated in order to meet the needs of all children

... Developmentally and culturally appropriate

Young children understand the world in different ways from adults. They need to express and explore their experiences symbolically, using toys, role plays, and concrete materials. They live very much in the present, though their experience of the present is influenced by their past. Thus helping them to process conflicts and violence that they have experienced in the past includes

creating a safe environment where they will not hurt themselves or others. It requires the freedom to express difficult emotions in contexts where they will not be creating further problems for themselves. In many cases drama, art, and sand play activities can offer children a safe forum for expressing feelings. In other cases, adults need to respond to antisocial behaviors in consistent, non-violent ways that help the child to see new options for expressing themselves.

... Closely related to the experiences of the child within her or his community

Adults working with young children need to ask themselves: what has this child experienced? What does the world look like through her or his eyes? A starting point for answering this question is to involve the children, their parents, and other community members in naming and identifying what they have experienced and also what they would like to experience. This does not need to be an academic exercise. Using games and songs that ask children to fill in their own experiences is effective. Using recall and storytelling, and encouraging children to create and label pictures, helps them to articulate their understanding. Working with parents and children together to collect play materials and set up group play areas helps the community to ask itself what experiences it wants to reinforce for its young children. In other words, programmes for young children and their families should be frameworks which the individual participants flesh out with the details of their culture and local context.

...Based on the specific needs and resources of the community

Early childhood care and development programmes can use traditional tribal arts, music, stories, dance, ritual, and forms of social organization as the basis of their curriculum. Elders and others in the community who remember aspects of traditional culture can be incorporated into thematic explorations with children. Stories can be written down by teachers, to serve as the classroom books. They can be illustrated or acted out by children. Traditional music can serve as the basis for exploring sounds and rhythms, and traditional crafts can offer opportunities to explore math and science concepts.

Depending on their individual histories and experiences, families and young children might need very different levels of help with learning to resolve conflicts. In South Africa, for example, many individuals and subgroups have been dislocated and disenfranchised under Apartheid. For Black children whose families have struggled with poverty and suffered from racial hatred, activities which focus on building self-esteem and instilling pride in their family and tribal traditions would be appropriate. Non-Black South African children might require a somewhat different focus, including exposure to their own traditional cultures, but emphasizing also peace and acceptance of differences.

When children have experienced and witnessed extreme violence and destruction, then games and role plays can be used to help them address their fears and horrors symbolically. Survivors and strong role models from the community can be incorporated into activities to remind children that their experiences have in fact been survived.

...Based on indigenous methods of conflict resolution

Conflict resolution does not have to be a Western technique imported from abroad. It is most effective when it can be based on indigenous traditions, when these can still be remembered by individuals from the culture. In many cases where children and families live in conflict and with displacement, old methods of problem solving and social organization have fallen by the wayside. Traditional childrearing practices may have been severely disrupted when families were moved, split up, or pressured by untenable working schedules. But the values which people hold in their cultures can be re-identified and re-affirmed and reinforced through programmes for young children.

In Sri Lanka, for example, a programme for conflict resolution was developed that was uniquely suited to the culture of the country. The programme starts with the culturally-based premise that conflict originates in the mind, and therefore it is important to begin with the individual's attitude toward himself. The person with a positive self-image views others in a positive way, whereas a person who lacks self-esteem views others with suspicion and hostility. The goal of the programme, which is also a cultural goal, is to promote the development of a peaceful citizen.

One of the ways the programme does this is to include meditation, a practice that is common in Sri Lanka in both the Buddhist and Hindu religions. Meditation is seen as a practice that can assist with and develop inner peace. The programme uses meditation as a strategy to support some of the values participants identified: kindness to animals, protection of the environment, belief in democracy, appreciation of nonviolence, and discouragement of war. Students are encouraged to clear their mind and/or focus on a particular thought, e.g. something in nature from which one could draw strength. The programme often uses meditation as a way to begin and end children's group experiences.

... Built on young children's interests

When young children are given opportunities to work with a range of materials, to play and to make up songs, stories, and games, they naturally begin to reveal their concerns, interests, and fears. Caregivers need to observe what children are doing and learn to interpret the concerns expressed by their role play, in their drawings, and in their patterns of activity. With this knowledge, caregivers can then plan group or individual activities that can help draw children out. Mirror play and naming exercises can help children get clearer images of themselves. Games that help children to identify and appreciate parts of the body, facial expressions, various emotions, can all help to create a sense of self. Play that focuses on a child's particular interests, whether it be playing with toy trucks or sorting multi-colored beads and buttons can become the forum to explore and discuss children's feelings about things, people, actions, themselves, and their environment.

...Interactive

Children learn from their interactions with others. In cases where children have been living with conflict, their behaviors often reflect this conflict and make it difficult for them to interact

fruitfully with their peers and with adults around them. Caregivers need to learn to structure interactions so that children have some positive models for interacting and a safe context in which to interact. Children need help to focus their interactions, and they need clear messages about how they can interact successfully. When children spend their days forced to sit still and listen to an adult talking, they do not learn much about constructive interactions!

A clear daily routine, which children understand and can predict, is one of the best tools to foster healthy interactions. The routine can include large group activities and games, which can be used to introduce patterns to children, for example: passing out snacks at snack time, sharing news at circle time, singing participatory songs as a way to close the day's activities. The routine can include regular small group activities: small reading or math exploration groups, twosomes or threesomes organized and supported in accomplishing particular tasks. It can also include alone and rest times, adult-child and child-child time, and times for community members to regularly interact with children in predictable and clear ways. All of this structure allows children to learn what to expect and to know themselves better. It gives them ways to recognize how their behavior affects themselves and others.

...Multi-sensory

Adults tend to think and express themselves verbally: with words. But children tend to use their bodies, their voices, and their manipulation of materials to express their understandings of the world. Children will learn techniques of problem-solving by having real problems to solve. When the wood is too long to fit on the wagon, when there are three children and only two balls; when the pillows keep tipping over and destroying their "house," children have opportunities to define and set about solving their problems (and conflicts). With repeated daily occasions for problem-solving and with appropriate adult support, children build up a new repertoire of nonviolent, non-passive, and creative ways to address challenging situations.

Children will express their understandings of conflict by verbal and non-verbal means. Materials to teach new modes of conflict resolution can be drawn from all media. Caregivers can use water play to help children explore how to move water from one kind of container to another (and along with it issues of placement and displacement). They can use games that involve exploring the feel of different substances, to help children develop a vocabulary for how things feel physically. They can use sounds and the creation of music to help children learn ways of letting off steam and creating group rhythms and harmony. Art materials are a rich medium to encourage self-expression and also problem solving. Even the serving of meals can be an opportunity to solve problems relating to sharing, distribution, and socializing.

... Multi-disciplinary

Children's lives are often fragmented when the adults around them are under stress and social pressures. Programmes that allow children to play and participate in integrated activities help to counteract this sense of fragmentation. When children take a familiar folktale and turn it into a play, complete with costumes, props, playbill, music, and "ticket sales", they are integrating many different kinds of activity and attention. When students explore nature in a holistic way, through

science experiments, artistic depiction, field trips, myth, and other realms, they are also learning to integrate their minds, their hearts and their bodies. Multidisciplinary activities allow children a multitude of interactions, potential conflicts, the motivation to resolve them, and a reason to be working productively with others. Caregivers who have not been educated themselves in a multi-disciplinary setting sometimes need help to identify and set up the richer (and sometimes more chaotic) multi-disciplinary projects which can serve as a forum for learning conflict resolution.

... Integrated in order to meet the needs of all children

Individual children respond differently, even to the same violent events. And within a community, each child has been exposed to different levels of violence and conflict. Therefore it is useful to create activities that are multi-dimensional and that allow for many levels of participation and diverse kinds of contributions from children. It is often desirable to create activities that also bring children and adults together, that allow for multi-age and multi-skill levels, that are holistic. In such activities, the goal is to find ways for each person to contribute. Because this grouping most resembles the demographics of a larger community, it offers opportunities for people to emerge from the experience feeling better about themselves and their community.

A multiple-level, integrated activity offers greater opportunity for children to learn the kinds of problem solving and skills they will need in everyday life than an exercise where children are asked to each do the same activity—such as drawing a picture of the local market. For example, introducing a game where children set up a "market" and make all the goods they will offer allows for diverse and integrated participation. Each child can find ways to contribute according to her or his own abilities, interests, and social-skill level. Yet all the children will be able to benefit from the joint successes.

Summary of Strategies

Work with children, parents, and caregivers to identify both the strengths that children already exhibit and the conflicts, difficult behaviors, lacks, and trauma caused by their exposure to violence.

Identify with all participants' values that are important to them. What do they want for their children (themselves)? What are their fears for the children (themselves)? What are their traditional expectations for children (themselves) and how have those changed?

Create an environment that will be safe for children:

- set up a safe physical space;
- find reliable and competent people to care for the children;
- create a daily routine based on the various types of experience children need;
- gather lots of materials that children can safely explore and manipulate;

- and identify clear expectations for adults' and children's behaviour that will allow adults to be clear and consistent, and will give children both the freedom to explore and the structure they need.

Identify problem areas and create strategies for addressing them throughout the child's day: in art, music, drama, writing, reading, storytelling, physical actions, games, and discussion too. Caregivers need to articulate their goals for children to themselves and use those goals in designing their setting and activities. They then need to allow children the room to explore within the setting and activities: to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes in a non-punitive environment.

Identify and build on the strengths of the individual children and their culture and community.

Introduce as many positive role models as possible, and incorporate them into the children's activities in an ongoing way.

Reach out to parents and community members for help in naming the issues and addressing them creatively.

Create multi-age activities, such as plays and community work or social functions that allow parents to practice wholesome problem-solving and conflict resolution alongside their children.

This article was adapted from a booklet prepared by EDC LearnTech and USAID/Pretoria for use in South Africa; references specific to South Africa have been removed for publication here.

For copies of the booklet, titled: Resolving Conflicts and Making Peace--Basic Skills for Young Children in a New South Africa, contact: Education Development Center, 1250 24th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, USA, fax: (202) 223-4059.

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