



## Families ... generations of strength

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# Teaching Children to Resolve Conflict

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Many parents feel discouraged when their children bicker or resist requests made of them. How do we teach children to cooperate and resolve conflict?

If we want children to stop fighting, we must teach them new skills for resolving conflict. They need to learn problem-solving skills and develop avenues for generating lots of alternatives for getting what they want in socially acceptable ways. We also want them to become independent and accountable.

It has been found that a child's ability to get what he or she wants in an acceptable manner is directly related to the number of solutions or alternatives the child can think of in a situation. A child who can think of five ways to get what he wants will generally display more socially acceptable behavior than the child who can think of only one or two ways.

Here are some general steps in teaching problem-solving skills to children.

- **Get the facts and the feelings.** When children are upset, fighting, angry, or hurt, first find out the details. When questions like, "What happened?" are asked calmly and nonjudgmentally, children usually calm down and answer them.  
Spend some time focusing on feelings. Children see things primarily from their own perspective. They may be completely unaware of how their behavior affects other people, except when another person interferes with their needs. To negotiate solutions that are

fair to everyone, children need to know how others feel.

- **Help children see the goal.** Generating ideas for solutions is much easier for children when they have a clear goal. Help children define the problem in terms of what both children want to happen. For example, "What can you do so you have room to play with blocks and Casey has room to drive his truck?" When the problem is phrased this way, children get the idea that the needs of *both* are important.
- **Generate alternatives.** To help children resolve conflict, adults can help them stay focused on the problem. Adults can also act like a "blackboard." When children suggest alternatives, adults can repeat the ideas then ask them what else could be done. Resist the temptation to suggest ideas as most children might assume their own thoughts are not good enough. If a child needs new ideas, suggest them later or ask the child to imagine how someone else they know might handle the situation.
- **Evaluate consequences.** After the children have generated all the ideas they can, evaluate the consequences. Ask them, "What might happen if you...?" or "How might Matt feel if you...?" Resist the temptation to judge the ideas. Adults will not always be around to tell a child that his/her idea

is not good and to suggest another. In the long run, adults will be more helpful by encouraging children to evaluate ideas themselves and see why they are unacceptable.

- **Ask for a decision.** When the children have completed thinking of and evaluating ideas, the remaining task is to make a plan. Restate the problem, summarize the ideas, and let the children decide which they will try. If they choose an alternative you think will not work, be sure they know what they

should do next.

The process of teaching problem-solving often seems tedious, and parents may be tempted to just tell a child what to do. But that does not allow children to gain the experience of thinking of what to do for themselves.

**Source:**

Elizabeth Creary (1984) *Kids Can Cooperate*, Parenting Press.