Teaching Children to Resolve Conflict

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 socially acceptable alternatives for getting what they want.

Research has shown 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 or she wants will generally display more socially acceptable behavior than the child who can think of only one or two ways. Following are some general steps in teaching problem-solving skills to children.

1. Understand the problem and help children see the goal

When children are upset, fighting, angry, or hurt, first find out the details. When questions such as, “What happened?” are asked calmly and in a non-judgmental way, children usually calm down and answer them.

Spend some time focusing on feelings. Children see things primarily from their own perspectives. They may be completely unaware of how their behavior affects other people, except when another person interferes with their needs. To negotiate fair solutions, children need to know how others feel.

Generating ideas for solutions is much easier for children when they have a clear goal. When two children have a conflict, help them 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 Janine has room to drive her truck?” When the problem is phrased this way, children get the idea that the needs of both are important.

2. Stress the importance of honesty

Sometimes being truthful is not seen as the best approach from a child’s view. If honesty means not getting my own way or leads to the possibility of punishment, lying may appear to be the better option. Help children realize that being honest is a strength of character and leads to friendships and benefits in the long-term.

3. Teach reflective listening skills

Help children express themselves from their perspective using “I-messages” and reflective listening. By sharing feelings and understanding others’ feelings, better solutions can be agreed upon. 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 …?”

4. Encourage apologies for hurts

By claiming responsibility for actions, children better understand their role in the conflict and how others feel. Encourage the children to apologize by saying, “I was wrong when I …, and I am sorry.”
5. Support an agreement to change actions in the future

When the children have completed thinking of ideas and evaluating them, make a plan. Restate the problem, summarize the ideas, and let the children decide which idea they will try. If they choose an alternative you think will not work, be sure they know what they should do next.

Resist the temptation to judge the ideas. Adults will not always be around to tell a child that his or her idea is not good and to suggest another. In the long run, adults are more helpful by encouraging children to evaluate ideas themselves and understand why they are unacceptable.

6. Model caring towards all persons involved

Perhaps the best way to teach a child is to be a good role model. In daily life accentuate the importance of helping and caring for others. After a solution has been agreed upon help the child think of other ways he or she can be a helper to that person and others.

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.

Sources
Retrieved from Ohio Parent Information Network database.

Revised by Cheryl Spires, Extension Educator, Family and Consumer Sciences.