

Independent Resolution: A Guide to False Conflict in Children

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Abstract: The intent of this article is to help teachers and child care providers in assisting children to identify situations that do not require adult intervention and resolve their own false conflict.

Key terms: *False conflict, conflict resolution, cooperation, teamwork*

“Teacher, he won’t stop staring at me.” “She’s following me.” “They are being too noisy.” As teachers we are always receiving information about the big problems at school: the pushing and shoving, name calling and, of course, bullying. Rarely do we get tips on handling the everyday problems we hear many times throughout the day. Most of these situations do not necessitate teacher intervention, but the children do not have the tools necessary to achieve their desired result. Here I have compiled helpful information, suggestions and activities to help teach children how to resolve small conflicts on their own.

Many conflicts that we deal with every day fall into Morton Deutsch’s category of False Conflict. This is where there is no objective basis for a conflict at all. This occurs when there is misperception or misunderstanding. (Conflict Research Consortium Staff, 2015) While the information you will find here are helpful in all kinds of conflict, this will be my main focus.

Picture a scenario in which children are having free play in the gym: There are some kids playing with basketballs, a handful playing floor hockey with everyone else scattered about the edges jumping rope, bouncing balls, or playing catch. Everything is going fine when suddenly the unthinkable happens: a basketball bounces into “Mary” who is playing hockey. You know what comes next; “Teacher, “Vinny” threw his basketball at me!”

Time and time again I find myself in situations just like this. My first question is always the same, “Did Vinny throw the ball at you, or do you think

it might have been an accident?” Nine times out of ten Mary will tell me it was an accident, in which case I ask Mary if she thought Vinny *knew* that his ball hit her.

Let’s pretend Vinny knew the ball hit Mary. A short conversation with both children will take place. I can’t count how many “Vinny’s” I have had to teach that it is polite to apologize for an accident even if no one got hurt. I can tell you this: it’s the same amount of “Mary’s” I have had to teach that an apology isn’t *always* necessary.

Now let’s pretend Vinny is completely oblivious. This is when you get false conflict. There was a misunderstanding because Mary thought that Vinny threw the ball at her. Then she didn’t get an apology so she perceived a negative situation. Vinny, on the other hand, has no idea anyone even wants an apology.

So how do we help Mary to recognize which problems she can attempt to work out on her own and which ones require immediate mediation? And why is it so important for her to do this on her own? Children who can resolve conflicts on their own are more likely to be accepted by their peers thus, making social integrations of all kinds easier as they mature. We can’t simply tell them this. Instead we need to find ways to help her 1) understand and verbalize feelings (in herself and others), 2) develop cooperation skills (teamwork), and 3) communicate effectively (explaining feelings, listening, being assertive). All of these combined give her the tools she needs to solve many of her daily conflicts.

Feelings

There are many ways to help children understand feelings. Of course none of these is a cookie cutter that will work well for every child so here are a few different tools you can use to help your children.

Share past experiences: Sit in a circle with a small group of children and talk about how you felt during a frustrating situation and how you responded to those feelings. Have the children

take turns doing the same. See if they can identify triggers: Who or what upset you? Where did it happen (is the environment part of a trigger)? How did you respond? Could there have been a better response? If so, please explain. The idea behind the exercise is that if children have opportunities to practice identifying past feelings they are more likely to be able to identify and properly respond to new feelings and situations.

Role Play Dice: Have children take turns rolling dice to act out a scenario. One di should have feelings, the other can vary depending on your class. For younger classes you could use animals, for older kids you could use specific emotional triggers: i.e. sharing toys, budging, or (if we use our example from above) gym accidents. For added fun and understanding have a second child act as the “problem causer” and help guide them through the problem. Be sure not to skip the odd combinations: i.e. Happy & Budging. We all respond to situations differently and it is important to understand that some may have the opposite reaction than they would to a specific situation.

Show and tell: This last activity comes from Marissa Rex from Hiawatha Elementary in Toledo, Ohio. *A Healthy Way to Show Feelings* is an instructional article on how to lead your class in this activity. The basic idea of this activity is the same as sharing past experiences but with a twist!

Cooperation/Teamwork

Group work can be a dreadful thing for many children – it was for me. As a child I was awkward and shy with a low self-esteem. I didn’t actually *know* many of my classmates and didn’t know how to integrate myself into a new group. This made group work terrifying but taught me the importance of ice breakers.

You know those silly little games that we use at the beginning of meetings to get everybody motivated? Why don’t we use some of the same activates (tweaked when necessary) with children every time they get into their groups? This is necessary to reform bonds that may have been severed since the last group meeting (like Mary and Vinny).

Besides forming bonds children also need to understand the importance of teamwork. Often

times I see groups with one or two members (like me) who sit off to the side as if they have nothing to offer. In almost every situation this is not the case; the child may simply believe that someone else must think of their idea too. Whatever the reason, we need to help him understand that each person makes a difference.

My favorite activity to teach the importance of teamwork is the Spider Web. You start with a ball of string and a circle of kids. Hand the ball of string to one of the children instructing her to hold on to the end of the string while she throws the ball to a group-mate across the circle. Here is where it gets fun! Pick a topic question to answer before they throw the ball of string: i.e. everybody’s favorite color or ice cream. For older kids I enjoy creating a story where each kid adds a sentence before throwing the ball. Once the web is created, demonstrate what happens when one person lets go of their string, then two and so on. For better visual understanding place a light ball or balloon in the middle of the web before having the children let go of their strings. See how long it takes the ball to drop. If you were telling a story try to take out the pieces of the story that one person added. Would it be the same story?

Before you wind up all of the string cut a small piece (seven to eight inches) for each child and tell them to tie it onto their backpack to remind them that they are part of a big web. As an alternative you can do this as a unit (as long or short as you desire) and give them an envelope in which to store their string each time you complete a web. Once you have finished the unit each child will have enough string to weave a bracelet of their choosing.

Communication

Communication is key in any situation in which we deal with others – especially conflict. Many children find it much easier to express their feelings than to listen to others’ feelings. If we consider the ‘Feelings’ section of this paper we see that each of these activities is also an exercise in listening and the roll playing activity can easily be used to practice being assertive.

I love the idea of the dice game for teaching assertiveness because you can end up with everyday situations like Mary and Vinny. In our scenario I would ask Mary, since she was not hurt,

what her other options were after the ball hit her. Through the role playing activity you can help Mary use the correct language to speak with Vinny. "Why'd you hit me?" is not an ideal way to start any conversation.

Guide the conversation by asking questions: What is a polite way of talking to Vinny? Should you ask him *why* he hit you or inform him *that* he hit you? What do you hope will happen from this conversation? Is an apology necessary and if so, how do you politely ask for one? How do you respond if Vinny does not feel an apology is necessary? What can you do to make sure this problem does not occur again?

Solving the Problem
Here is where all of the other sections get wrapped into one. Mary has expressed and communicated her feelings. She has listened to Vinny and found out it was an accident and he was unaware of it. This is a good place to stop (Mary has spoken with Vinny and she knows he did not intentionally hit her with the ball. She could go back to her hockey game and all would be just fine) but we won't because my main purpose is to help children solve their problems, not just put a Band-Aid on them. If we left Mary at this point she (or someone else) will most likely have to repeat the scenario in a few minutes when another basketball makes its way into the hockey game.

Our desired solution is to have Mary use her assertiveness and teamwork skills to shift the boundaries for each game. To do so we need to help her observe the big problem: the kids playing basketball are too close to the boundary of the hockey game. Ask her questions regarding her surroundings: Where are the hockey boundaries? Can the game be moved over? Are there other basketball hoops that can be used? Next, ask her what constructive action she can take or give her

options: Should you tell the kids playing basketball that they are in your way or ask them to move? Should you call time out for the hockey game so everyone knows the new boundaries?

Summary

This paper is intended to assist teachers and child care providers in guiding children through conflict. Teaching children to understand their emotions and communicate them effectively gives them the tools they need to build successful relationships. When this occurs they will have more confidence to assert themselves appropriately. Eventually, with enough guidance and practice the "Mary's" and "Vinny's" of the world (amongst others) will be able to identify the causes of small conflicts and resolve them on their own.

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