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Six Small Steps and a Giant Leap for Conflict Resolution

by Cheryl Polk and Kenneth Sherman

Conflict resolution specialist Betsy Evans has often said, “Children don’t misbehave—they make mistakes.” In preschool classrooms, mistakes abound, often because children are not equipped to express their needs in socially acceptable ways. The conflicts that inevitably arise in a preschool classroom, though, are best seen as opportunities for children to experience social-emotional growth with the help of competent adults. To that end, Evans, author of several conflict resolution books, including *You Can’t Come to My Birthday Party!* and *You’re Not My Friend Anymore!*, developed a successful six-step problem solving process to help children resolve conflicts on their own. The goal for adults in the six-step process is to encourage children to resolve disputes by discussing how the conflict occurred and expressing their feelings in a safe environment.

The following scenario demonstrates how the six steps of conflict resolution work in the preschool classroom.

During work time, Mark and Allen were in the block area. Allen had a majority of the blocks and told Mark he wanted to use all of them. Mark, who had already planned to use the blocks to build a house, started to scream at Allen. The teacher approached calmly and placed himself between Allen and Mark.



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Teacher: (getting down at the children’s level) We have a problem. It looks to me like both of you are very upset. Mark, can you tell me what the problem is?

Mark: He’s not letting me use the blocks! He just wants to use all of them!

Allen: No, that’s—



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Dr. Cheryl Polk is a psychologist who brings her outstanding contributions to the creation of initiatives and public policies on behalf of young children and their families to her role of president at HighScope. She has a long record of success in translating research knowledge about the first five years of life into programs that address the continuum of young children’s needs, from high quality child care to mental health consultation and treatment, with specific focus on those who are most underserved.

In her prior position as executive director of the Lisa and John Pritzker Family Fund, Polk parlayed her dual expertise in early childhood development and philanthropy to guide the creation of groundbreaking intervention programs for children exposed to community and interpersonal trauma. Polk was president of the board of directors of Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families and was a board member of that organization for more than 15 years.

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Teacher: Hold on one second, Allen. I want to hear what Mark thinks the problem is, and then I'll hear what you think. (to Mark) So, the problem is that Allen is using all of the blocks, and you'd like to use some, too?

Mark: Yes.

Teacher: (to Allen) And what about you, Allen? What's the problem?

Allen: I want to use the blocks. He can do something else.

Teacher: So, your problem, Allen, is that you want to use all of the blocks, and you don't want to share with Mark right now?

Allen: Yeah, I don't want to share with Mark right now.

Teacher: I wonder how we can solve this problem. Do you have any ideas?

Allen: I think I should have the blocks first, and then he can have them.

Teacher: That's an idea. What do you think, Mark?

Mark: I don't like that idea. I think I should have the blocks first. He can use them a little bit later.

Teacher: So, let's see. It seems like the problem is that you both want to use the blocks now. I wonder if, Mark, you can use the little blocks, and Allen, you can use the big blocks.

Allen: No! I need these blocks—all the blocks!

Teacher: So, we have two boys who want to use the same blocks, and two boys with different ideas. Do you want to hear another idea of mine? We could use the timer. Then someone could take it for a little while—

Mark: No, I don't want to use a timer! I don't want to wait here for him to use the blocks. That's boring!

Teacher: Oh, Mark, there are plenty of ideas for things to do while you wait for your turn. How about if I set the timer for 10 minutes? Allen, you can have your turn first, and Mark, I'll help you make a plan for

what to do while Allen is using the blocks. Does that sound OK?

Allen: Sounds OK.

Mark: You'll help me make a plan?

Teacher: Of course. Let me just set the timer for 10 minutes. (sets timer) There. Now, Mark, would you like to sit on the couch and make another plan with me?

Mark: OK.

Teacher: Great. It looks like we solved the problem!

In the conflict resolution process, the teacher's role is to act as a neutral facilitator between the children who are having a disagreement. To do this, he follows six steps, using a calm voice and gentle touch, to guide the children toward successful conflict resolution.

Steps 1 and 2: Supporting Feelings

The first two steps in problem solving encourage children to express their strong feelings, giving them the time and acceptance they need to make their feelings known.

Step 1: Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.

Adults calmly approach the situation, stopping any hurtful actions or words.

Step 2: Acknowledge children's feelings.



Photo by Bonnie Neugebauer

The adult communicates concern for what children are feeling by making simple statements: "It looks like both of you are very upset." Responding in this way allows children to fully express their feelings.

Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6: Support the children's solutions.

In the last four steps of the mediation process, children take the initiative in finding a solution. These steps are the "thinking" part of problem solving.

Step 3: Gather Information

Children tell what they think has happened or what they want. The type of question we ask during this phase of problem solving is also important. Simple "what questions" gather information most effectively. A teacher might say, "I want to hear what Mark thinks the problem is, and then I'll hear what you think."

Step 4: Restate the Problem

This step helps to clarify details. At the beginning of problem solving there is so much emotion that some information may not be heard. To restate the problem, we make a simple summary of the information: "So, let's see. It seems like the problem is that you both want to use the blocks now."

Step 5: Ask for Ideas for Solutions and Choose One Together

The adult asks the question, "What can we do to solve this problem?" As children tell us their ideas, we encourage all the participants in the dispute to consider whether the proposed solution will work for them.

Step 6: Be Prepared to Give Follow-up Support

After the children agree to a solution, the adult helps them transition from conflict back to play. Statements such as, "It looks like we solved the problem!" are important because they give children confidence that they can carry with them to resolve future conflicts.

Through the six-step process, children learn to express their own feelings, ideas, and needs. They also become sensitive to the feelings, interests, and needs of others. As they navigate conflicts with the help of a caring adult, children learn the real power of expressing themselves and considering the needs of others, and experience the feelings of control and competence that come from contributing to the resolution of a problem.