When Push Comes to Shove — Reconsidering Children's Conflicts

by Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane E. Levin

"I've seen disturbing changes in 15 years of working with young children. There are growing numbers of kids who punch and lash out at the slightest provocation. Sometimes I feel more like a police officer than a teacher. I seem to be spending more of my time breaking up fights instead of doing the things I used to do — things that need to be done. I plan the day's activities around the problem children. What will happen to these kids as they get older?"
(an early childhood teacher)

Increases in Violent Conflict Resolution

In ten years of studying young children and violence, we have heard concerns like this with increasing frequency. Many adults who work with children are disturbed by the growing levels of aggression that children use with each other when conflicts occur, and about the limited resources many children seem to have for working out their disputes nonviolently.

The results of our recent national survey on teachers' experiences with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) in their classrooms reflect these concerns (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1992). Of the 73 teachers from 19 states who responded to our questionnaire, 89% mentioned negative effects of the Turtles on children's behavior and interpersonal relationships. Typical responses were:

• "I see an increase in aggression and rough behavior in a group that was generally a fairly nonaggressive group."

• "I feel TMNTs have affected my children greatly by making them think it's okay and fun to fight with other people."

• "I've never seen children resort to so many physical solutions to their conflicts."

• "They seem to think that beating up people is okay."

How Children Learn to Resolve Conflicts

Understanding how children learn to resolve their conflicts can help to explain why the Turtles have wreaked havoc in so many classrooms. It can also help us begin to develop effective ways to counteract their negative effects.

Children build ideas about conflict and how to resolve it through a slow process of construction. They take what they see and hear about conflict and actively transform it into something that has meaning for them; they try out their ideas, see how they work, and modify them. The meaning they make depends on both their own particular experience with conflict and their level of development (Piaget, 1952; Selman, 1980).

Just as children learn to read and write from being in environments rich with print and opportunities to experiment with it, they learn conflict resolution skills from the environment and from trying out the skills they see in a wide range of situations. Because of this, preventing children from having conflicts is not always the best approach; they need opportunities to experience conflicts and then lots of ideas about possible ways to resolve them.

Young children are just beginning to construct what will eventually become mature adult concepts about conflict and conflict resolution.

Do As We Say, Not As We Do — The Conflict Dilemma for Children

What Children See

Children growing up today are exposed to more violence than ever before. Last spring the Senate Judiciary Committee released a report calling the United States the most violent nation on earth (Weiner, 1991). American citizens committed at least three killings per hour last year. Over the past generation, the number of violent crimes has risen 12 times faster than the population (Miedzian, 1991).

More than 20% of American children experience violence which is a direct result of living in poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 1990). And there are countless other children who hear about this violence through accounts in the media. In addition to this, the model children see for the resolution of international conflict is one of violence. One year ago, the United States aggressively pursued a violent course in the Persian Gulf. There was little discussion about how to resolve the conflict without violence; focus was on the success of US military technology and not on the death and destruction it caused.

Then there is an overwhelming amount of *entertainment* violence on television and in other media which inundates children with daily doses of pretend war and fighting. Children, aged three to six years, spend an average of four hours a day watching television. By the age of 18, they will have spent the equivalent of seven years watching (more time than spent in school) and will have seen over 26,000 killings. But these killings are only part of the picture.

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles reflect the pinnacle of a phenomenon which began with the deregulation of children's television. Deregulation made it possible for toy manufacturers to develop and market toys through television shows, a practice which was previously banned by the Federal Communications Commission. In search of big profits, a plethora of violent programs for children arrived, such as "Masters of the Universe," "GI Joe," and "Transformers." The sale of war toys increased rapidly, too — to over one billion dollars annually by 1989 — as whole lines of single-purpose toys that were linked to each show were marketed with the shows.

The single-purpose function of these toys was usually a violent one which encouraged children to replicate in their play the violence they saw on the shows. Not only do children now see a lot more *just for fun* violence on television than they did in the past, but when they are not watching it, they are encouraged to have a good time imitating it with their toys.

Add to this change the vast array of products — lunch boxes, pajamas, and breakfast cereals — which are licensed to use the logos of the violent shows. In the case of the Turtles, no fewer than 1,000 products were licensed to be on store shelves when the first movie arrived in the spring of 1990. Children could literally go to bed and wake up never able to get these violent images off their minds.

What messages are children getting from all of this? "When people have a conflict, violence is the one method of choice for resolving it." "Fighting is glamorous and fun." "There's always a *good side* which is all good and a *bad side* which is all bad." "If you're on the *good side*, it's okay to do whatever you want." And, "in any conflict, there's always a winner and a loser."

What We Say — The Dilemma

What the popular culture teaches children about conflict and conflict resolution stands in stark contrast to the lessons most adults are trying to teach. "Don't hit. You need to use words. Hitting hurts. I can't let you hurt someone else." Or, "You need to share. We have it here for everyone to use. If you can't share, you'll have to find something else to do." These common dictates tell children that we expect them to resolve their conflicts without violence.

It is expecting a lot to ask children to ignore all the violent messages they get from the popular culture and instead use only the nonviolent ones we advocate. Serious difficulties are created for children when they try to reconcile these two dichotomous worlds. They do not have the cognitive skills to sort out all of the information they are given, nor have they had enough opportunities to build the repertoire of conflict resolution skills we want them to have.

Their understanding goes through a long, slow progression and is very different from that of adults. For them, conflicts and their solutions are often seen in concrete terms and from one point of view. Children often focus on one aspect of a situation at a time, not seeing the relationships of the parts of a conflict to the whole. It is often hard for them to think about the beginning (conflict), middle (negotiation), and end (solution) in any logically interconnected way.

What an environment tells children about how people treat each other or about what can be done when there is a conflict provides an important data base for them as they try to figure out how to resolve their own conflicts.

Rethinking How We Deal with Conflict

Many of the ways commonly used by teachers to deal with conflicts in the classroom do not fully address the needs of children today brought about by changes in the last 10 years (see box on page 35). Most focus on stopping conflicts as quickly as possible so that regular classroom life can continue. For instance, the practice of sending children to *time out* stops a conflict, but it does not help the children learn any alternative ways for resolving their conflict. When we tell children to *use words* instead of fists, we are not helping them learn the actual words they might use. Both approaches do little to give children the data they need to build up their repertoire of nonviolent conflict resolution skills.

Many teachers are already spending more time dealing with conflicts than they did in the past. We sometimes wonder if the trend in early childhood classrooms toward replacing *free play* with more structured, traditional curriculum activities like worksheets and teacher-led *lessons* is not, at least in part, an attempt by teachers to find ways to decrease the amount of conflict and violence that occurs among young children when they have a chance to interact freely with one another.

A compensatory curriculum in conflict resolution is needed to help counteract the enormous doses of violent content children are being given from the world around them. We have to provide children with an alternative content, a wide range of positive ways for resolving conflict that are appealing and matched to their level of development. With young children, this means helping them figure out how to use that content directly in their own lives, helping them build their own repertoire of effective conflict resolution skills in ways that help them feel powerful and competent. We have to give them lots of opportunities to try out the new things they are learning and then modify and build on them. We need to see conflict resolution training as a legitimate part of the curriculum, devote time and energy to it, and improve our own skills at doing it.

Creating a Conflict Resolution Curriculum

There are a whole range of concrete ways young children can be helped to build a repertoire of nonviolent conflict resolution skills. Everything we do and say conveys information to children about power relationships, and about how they should treat each other and how they will live together in a community. In "Creating Safe Places for Conflict Resolution to Happen" (page 43), Carolyn Edwards discusses how to create classroom environments which promote the development of positive conflict resolution skills.

In "Moving Children from Time-Out to Win/Win" (page 38), we describe how adults can help children learn how to work through their conflict to the extent that their developmental abilities allow. In response to increasing levels of violence in schools, many programs have been developed around the country for helping older children learn conflict resolution skills (**Harvard Education Letter**, 1991). Most are based on a model for resolving conflict developed by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) which involves teaching a set of skills for getting from a conflict to a solution where everyone wins (a win/win solution). The "Getting to Yes" approach was developed for adults and adapted to the abilities of older elementary and high school children. It often involves working out a series of hypothetical conflicts during weekly lessons. In our article we have tried to show how this approach can be further adapted to the developmental abilities and needs of young children. We also describe other ways teachers can begin to infuse developmentally appropriate conflict resolution into the curriculum.

A New Challenge

Teachers are experiencing the effects that changes in American society are having on children and on the quality of classroom life. Traditional approaches for dealing with conflict often leave teachers feeling frustrated and do not offer children a chance to learn the specific skills they need to resolve their conflicts peacefully. A more deliberate approach to teaching conflict resolution has become a necessity for many teachers and children.

Most adults in our society have not had a lot of experience themselves learning how to deal with conflict constructively, let alone helping children learn how to do it. Because of the constructivist nature of

learning, there is no pat conflict resolution formula available. But there are some concepts and skills that we can teach children in ways that respect their developmental understandings.

We have seen many children show genuine excitement at finding win/win solutions to their conflicts and at having the chance to try out their solutions. And they seem to love sharing these accomplishments with other children and adults. Many adults voice similar enthusiasm as they see children feeling empowered to use words instead of fists, and as they themselves experience the power that comes from having the skills for genuinely helping children learn how to work out conflicts nonviolently.

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