One of the important goals of conflict mediation is the creation of a mutually agreeable solution. During the first two steps of mediation, adults create a safe and trust-building start for discussion by acknowledging and accepting children’s feelings. During the remaining four steps, adults guide the solution-seeking process by encouraging children to describe what has happened and to imagine all the possible ways they might solve the problem. During **step 3, gather information**, the adult solicits the details of the dispute from each child’s point of view. During **step 4, restate the problem**, the adult repeats or reframes what the children have said, ensuring that each point of view has been understood. During **step 5, ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together**, the adult communicates to the children that they are in charge of the outcome and supports them as they think collaboratively and agree on a solution. During **step 6, be prepared to give follow-up support**, the adult affirms the children’s
accomplishments as problem solvers and keeps a watchful eye on the results for a short period. Each of these steps plays a unique role in getting to solutions.

**Step 3. Gather Information: “What’s the Problem?”**

Gathering information about what has happened during a conflict is critical to finding a solution that will work for everyone. In fact, the children’s descriptions of their dispute often contain information that may be the starting place for the solution. In an argument over a race car, for example, one child said, “I want the pink car,” and the other child said, “I want the fast car.” The adult’s job is to listen intently for and restate these small details that subsequently make finding a solution much easier for the children to think about.

When the emotions of the conflict have calmed, we can initiate step 3 by asking the children questions about the conflict. Be sure to begin these questions with what rather than why. “Why” questions (“Why did you do that?” “Why did you hit her?”) seek someone to blame. Children sense this and clam up.

Asking “What happened?” or “What is the problem?” is an effective way to elicit the specific details needed for a resolution. As children respond, it’s important for us to listen for each child’s perception of the problem without judgment, so that we may repeat or restate relevant details for the children to consider. Our key role in this step is to continue to listen neutrally, avoiding taking sides or forming opinions about the situation.

The children’s descriptions of the problem may range from simple to puzzling to downright complicated. In any case, the mediator’s role is to be a conduit and facilitator. A child may state the problem simply and clearly — “I want some of that play dough” — and the other child may then hand some over. Or a child may say something like “I don’t like her yelling at me!” providing information about what happened during the conflict but not about the original problem. Or the children may go back and forth several times, saying “I had it first!” Be sure to avoid inadvertently taking sides by agreeing with one child by saying “Oh, you had it first.” We simply need to repeat the information (“You’re both saying you had it first”).

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**Six Steps in Conflict Mediation**

1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.
2. Acknowledge children’s feelings.
3. Gather information.
4. Restate the problem.
5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together.
6. Be prepared to give follow-up support.
Imagining a Solution and Agreeing on How It Will Work

Additionally, children’s answers may not initially give us direct information about the problem, but it is still important to receive whatever they say without judgment and with attentive listening and respect. This reassures children that it is safe to continue communicating and encourages them to carry on with their explanations until all the issues have been explored. This approach usually leads to a more complete and candid picture of what has happened.

Stories about having it first and wanting to be first

There are a few ways that the issue of “first” comes up. In the following stories we will look at the variations. In this opening “first” story, Jared and Hujun are both two years and nine months old and have just transitioned from the toddler room, where the adults supported them with problem-solving strategies. Both boys want to play with the Power Rangers figure and motorcycle. Hujun is very teary but responds to having his feelings named many times and finally calms enough to agree on a solution. The

Gathering information about what has happened during a conflict is critical to finding a solution that will work for everyone. Like mining for precious nuggets, Becky’s careful listening helps everyone sort through all the details, revealing the special bits that will lead to a successful outcome.
solution could have been to take turns, to each use a toy, or to use them together, but none of these typical solutions happened. Jared and Hujun’s solution was a total surprise.

“I was using this first!” Jared and Hujun both want the Power Rangers figure and motorcycle*

Hujun is crying and saying something about Jared and toys. Betsy sees that Jared is playing with a motorcycle that has a Power Rangers figure riding it.

Betsy: Let’s go over and talk to him. (To Jared) He’s feeling really sad. I think we have a problem.

Jared: I was using this first.

Betsy: You were using that first. (Turning to Hujun) He’s saying he was using that first. (Hujun cries louder.) You’re feeling really, really sad. Really sad. (To Jared) He’s feeling really sad. (Betsy reaches for the toys.) I’m going to hold this for a minute, until we figure this out. (She slowly takes the toys.) I’m going to hold this, right here together, okay? So we have a problem… (Jared tries to take the rider back.) I’m going to hold both of these. (Betsy holds the rider and motorcycle. Hujun cries.) So we have a problem because you really want to have this and you really want to have this. So what can we do?

Jared: Because I want that.

Betsy: You really want this, don’t you? (To Hujun) And you really want this too, don’t you? (Hujun cries loudly.) You’re feeling so sad. You’re really sad. (Jared reaches for the toys.) I’m going to hold this until we figure it out. So what can we do? (Hujun stops crying.)

Jared: I found it on the counter.

Betsy: You found it on the counter? (To Hujun) He says he found it on the counter…and he’s wanting to use it and you’re wanting to use it.

Jared: Let’s put it on the counter. (Jared pulls both toys toward a shelf.)

Betsy: You think we should put it on the counter?

Jared: Yeah, I want it.

Betsy: You mean right up here?

Jared: No.

Betsy: Well, I’m going to hold it until we figure it out.

*Adapted from the DVD program It's Mine: Responding to Problems and Conflicts (Evans, 2006).
Imagining a Solution and Agreeing on How It Will Work

Jared: I want to put it on the counter.
Betsy: So your idea is that we are going to put it away on the counter and no one will use it? Is that your idea?
Jared: I put it on the counter.
Betsy: You want to put it on the counter. (To Hujun) So what do you think about that? He wants to put it on the counter and leave it there. Will that idea work?
Hujun: Yeah.
Betsy: That idea is okay with you?
Hujun: Yeah.
Betsy: Okay, so show me where you are going to put it. (Jared points to a high counter across the room.) Right over there on the counter. Okay, let's take it over together. Let's take it right over here together. Right over on the counter. Right up there. (Jared places both toys on the counter.) You solved the problem! (Hujun and Jared go off to play.)

Children have frequent conflicts that start with “I had it first!” The sand and water table presents an extra challenge for children as their play, and the toys they are using, are in close proximity as shown in this next story. The adult must respond neutrally to each child’s claim, as Yuderca does here in this next story by stating, “You’re saying you had it first.” In this way, she prioritizes negotiation rather than possession. As a result, children become more skilled at problem solving rather than becoming more skilled at being possessive.

Angelina and Bryce both want the yellow bowl first

It is work time on a cool October morning in a classroom for three-year-olds. Three children are playing at the sand and water table, which is filled with water and containers of various sizes. Angelina joins in at the table and stands next to Bryce, who has two containers in his hands. Angelina reaches for a large yellow bowl that no one is using.

Bryce: No, I had that! (Bryce tries to grab the yellow bowl, and Angelina screeches as they pull back and forth. Yuderca [the adult] comes over, kneels down by the table, and puts her hands on the bowl.)

Yuderca: We have a problem. I’m going to hold this. (They willingly let go of it.) You both sound frustrated.

Bryce: I had it.
Angelina: I want it.