Contents

Preface xi

Introduction 1

1 — Overview of the Problem-Solving Approach 5

Traditional Approaches to Conflict 7

The Requirements and Outcomes of Conflict Resolution 9

Gas and Simon want the same backpack 10

Why Conflict Mediation Works: Premises to Consider 11

The premises in action 16

Carly and Sam both want the last block 16

Child Development and Its Impact on Problem Solving 18

Egocentrism 18

Concrete thinking 19

Limited verbal skills 20

Physical expressiveness 21

Striving for independence 21

“One-thing-at-a-time” thinking 21

Developing empathy and self-regulation 22

The Mediation Steps: An Introduction 23

Steps 1 and 2: Supporting feelings 24

Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6: Supporting children’s solutions 26

The Steps in Action 30

Olivia and Armaan: “I want to play with the fire truck!” 31

Olivia seven months later 34

Punishment or Problem Solving: What Each Teaches 36

Mistakes and new learning 37

Why do adults punish? 39

Coerced outcomes versus child-chosen solutions 40

Lila wants to pet Jack’s Queen Bee 42

2 — A Supportive and Safe Beginning to Problem Solving 47

Step 1: Preparation, Perspective, and Strategies 47

Seeing children’s actions as social mistakes 48

Keeping the past in mind 51

Defining conflict and its value 52

Preparing for neutrality 53

Body language: Communicating calmness and neutrality 54

Step 2: Acknowledging Feelings — What Is It? 60

Understanding how children express their emotions 61

The adult’s response: Communicating that feelings are understood 62

The power of acknowledging feelings 64

Kristy: Overwhelmed by sad feelings 65

Self-esteem and acknowledging feelings 67

Strategies for Acknowledging Feelings 68

Reframing children’s strong feeling words and setting limits 68

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Evans, Betsy, author.

You can’t come to my birthday party : conflict resolution with young children / Betsy Evans. -- 2nd edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-57379-730-6 (soft cover)


BF723.E65F93 2016

649.1—dc23

2015031631

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Avoiding getting derailed by children’s strong feelings  70
Responding to “You’re not my friend!”  70
Setting limits  71
Modeling limit-setting strategies  73
Screaming needs to stop: Children learn how to set limits  73
Neutralizing objects in dispute  74
Watching for signs that feelings are fully expressed  76
Children who express emotions intensely and often  77
Lakisha, Douglas, and Alan: “He’s shooting at us!”  78
The Effect of Mediation on Social-Emotional Development  81
Development of emotional skills as violence and bullying prevention  82
Effects of emotional support on learning  83

3 — Imagining a Solution and Agreeing on How It Will Work  85
Step 3. Gather Information: “What’s the Problem?”  86
Stories about having it first and wanting to be first  87
“I was using this first!” Jared and Hujun both want the Power Rangers figure and motorcycle  88
Angelina and Bryce both want the yellow bowl first  89
Alex and Otto: “I want to go first!”  91
Reflections on stories about having it first  93
Step 4. Restate the Problem: So the Problem Is…  95
Step 5. Ask for Ideas for Solutions and Choose One Together: What Can We Do to Solve This Problem?  96
Problem-Solving With Infants or Toddlers: Where to Start?  100
Simon and Gus both want the big truck: Three stories  101
The Rationale for Child-Made Solutions  103
Facilitating Creative Solutions: Five Stories  105
Developing problem-solving skills  106
I can’t reach the blocks: Learning to problem-solve  106
Fairness and sharing: Their role in the mediation process  109
Christian, Mark, and Alex: “I need only one more!”  109
Facilitating more complex thinking about solutions  113
Fabian and Sean: “You can’t come to my birthday party!”  113
When conflicts begin to resolve with more complexity and less time  115
Ling and Jun: “She did have it first!”  116
Lydia and Jesse struggle over a stroller  117

4 — When Adults or Children Feel Upset: Responding to Strong Emotions  119
Children’s Emotional Expressions: What to Expect  120
Responding to Children’s Emotional Outbursts  122
Noticing and naming strong feelings  123
Lakisha and Seth: “I wanted the swing!”  124
Reflecting the intensity of children’s feelings  128
An illustration of acknowledging feelings often  128
Ian and Carl: “I want it RIGHT NOW!”  130
Adult Emotions and Conflict: The Role of Experience  132
Strategies to Use When Either Adults or Children Are Too Upset to Begin Problem Solving  134
Delaying problem solving and coaching children to calm themselves  134
Guiding a child to find a calming place  138
George: Finding a calming place  138
“I” statements: Constructive communication about strong feelings  138
Using “I” statements with other problem-solving strategies  140
Sylas and the chair  141
Language that gives limited choices  143
Preparing “I” messages for personal triggers  145
Aaron hits Sam: Betsy gets angry  145
Was this a good day or a bad day?  147
Assessing the Sources of Conflict  148
Dealing with intense emotions from non-classroom sources  150
Developmental stages in problem solving and adult responses  150
Spanking and classroom aggression  151
Dion: “Treat me like an older boy.”  151

Four Challenging Mediations  158
Wally’s story: Problem solving when both adult and child are very upset  160
Wally hits Betsy, over an itchy sweater  161
Asa’s story: Problem solving around safety issues  167
Asa refuses to problem-solve  167
Two stories of children and animals: Challenges to personal values  174
Ian and Mark Anthony: “He doesn’t want us to break worms!”  174
Ian, Tom, and Asa: “We killed a toad.”  179

5 — Learning to Problem-Solve: How Change Happens, One Child at a Time  185
Listening for Children’s Needs and Wants: Providing Positive Support and Limited Choices  187
Benny’s Stories  190
Replacing physical aggression with verbal assertiveness  191
Benny hits Max, then finds a solution for everyone  191
“Get off!”: Benny waits for horses  196
Did Benny “get his way”?  198
Supporting assertiveness  199
Following children’s leads and supporting playfulness  201
Benny problem-solves with “dinosaur talk”  201
Developing the ability to compromise 203
Benny and Ethan both want the trapeze 203
Benny solves an adult problem 205

Raven’s Stories 206
Resistance to problem solving 207
Raven pinches Anita and responds to problem solving with a tantrum 208
Verbal aggression: Name-calling — A step forward from physical aggression 211
Raven calls Anita a “butthead” 211
Raven yells at Antonio, without hurtful words or actions 213
Negotiations over control: An essential part of play 215
Shared control: A mediation outcome 216
Raven suggests a compromise solution at the dollhouse 216
Raven — Becoming a mediator 218
Raven and Anita resolve a problem 218

Chapter 6 — Solving Problems in Small Groups 221
Planning for Problem Solving in Small Groups 224
Using a planning sheet to help think ahead 224
Strategies for problem solving in small groups 225
Stories of Problem Solving in Small Groups 230
Small-group discussion — Problem: Running in the classroom 231
Problem solving in small groups in action 234
Small-group discussion — Problem: Sledding too fast 234
Problem-solving discussion around playground guidelines 239
Small-group discussion — Problem: Going to the playground without a teacher 239
Problem-solving discussion around “shooting” play 242
Small-group discussion — Problem: Shooting in the classroom 243
Problem-solving discussion around superhero play 246
Small-group discussion — Problem: Being safe while being “powerful” 246
Family problem-solving discussion 253
Family discussion — Problem: Being quiet for baby sister’s bedtime 253
Making a poem from children’s ideas 254
Spontaneous small-group discussion — Problem: What does peace mean? 255

Chapter 7 — Preventing Conflicts and Creating Emotionally Healthy Environments 259
Child Development Strategies 261
Keep in mind the young child’s unique developmental perspective 261
How one child’s problem-solving skills develop 264
Grandma wants to vacuum; Tom wants his blocks 264

Tom doesn’t want to ride in the stroller 265
Tom becomes an independent problem solver 265
Encourage children to be active learners throughout the day, supporting their feelings and decisions; avoid the use of praise or evaluation 272
It’s outside time, but Andrea is still busy indoors 274

Adult-Child Interaction Strategies 275
Introduce conflict mediation (with lots of patience and consistency) at the beginning of the school year 275
Zane pushes other children at the maze 277
Be fully available to and respectful of children 279
Edward uses a child’s name to get a vehicle 280
Establish a safe community for children and include them in deciding classroom guidelines 283
Mediate conflicts as they occur, focusing on actions, rather than people, when stopping hurtful or destructive behavior 285
Support independent problem solving 288
Alex, Hakeem, Reese, and Leroy problem-solve, independently: “Want to hear my idea!” 288
“We get into a little bit of an argument”: Jason describes how he solved a problem independently 290

Learning Environment and Daily Routine Strategies 291
Plan a learning environment that includes a variety of areas and materials 291
Establish and maintain a consistent daily routine 295
Help children anticipate and enjoy the transitions in the daily routine 295
Plan strategies for making cleanup time fun and interesting for children 296

Home-to-School Transitions Strategies 296
Plan an “orientation” period for each entering child 296
Plan strategies for parent departure times 298
Joel arrives at preschool 302

Assessment Strategies 303
Record observations of children on a regular basis 303
Examine your reasons for choosing to work with children 303

8 — Bullying: How to Prevent It Before It Starts 305

What Is Bullying in Preschool? 305
Noa decides who are (are not) her friends 306

Defining Bullying 308
What the Research Says 309
Why Children Bully 310
Mike wants to play 310

Adult Attitudes and Behaviors That Encourage Bullying 311
Direct and Indirect Forms of Bullying 312
Relational aggression 313
Avalon wants Delilah to be the baby 313
Verbal and physical aggression 317
Alexis and Pedro: “Stop it!” 317
Strategies to Prevent Bullying Behavior 319
Find positive (and immediate) ways to stop children from excluding and hurting others 320
Children on a log 320
“Screaming needs to stop!” 322
Break the cycle of constant limit-setting 323
Enable children to develop their own friendships, on their own terms 324
“We are all friends here...give me the swing!” 325
Grace, Niki, and Aja: “Stop following us!” 327
Use classroom names (instead of friends) to distinguish groups of children 332
Pay attention to children who frequently engage in hurtful actions or have few or no playmates, and plan support ways to intervene 335
Share problem-solving stories with parents 336
Model alternative strategies 337
Pedro wants to sit by Alexis 338

How Change Happens 339
How Our Efforts to Prevent Bullying and Support Children’s Problem Solving Come Together 341
Five-year-old Anonda mediates a problem between Jonas and Tyrese during work time 341

Afterword 345
Sarah and Amjad: “Could I have a go...?” 345

References 347
Story Index 353
General Index 356

Preface

The problem-solving approach to young children’s conflicts presented in this book builds on the work of many others in the fields of early childhood education and conflict mediation. This approach integrates conflict mediation strategies from various sources with the child development and teaching framework of the HighScope Preschool Curriculum, an approach I have used since 1989 in various teaching and supervisory roles at the Giving Tree School in Gill, Massachusetts, and as a field consultant and teacher-trainer for HighScope Educational Research Foundation.

During the 1980s, a variety of responses to children’s conflict situations, including both punishment and behavior modification techniques, continued to be a source of debate in the educational field. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, HighScope staff began the development of conflict-related teaching strategies based on the principle of “active learning.” As a part of HighScope’s development effort, teacher/consultants Michelle Graves and Ruth Strubank (1988/1991) described a “child management” approach (p. 35) that emphasized prevention of conflicts as well as techniques for “on-the-spot management” (p. 39).

The interest of HighScope’s curriculum developers in preventing classroom conflicts was one facet of a broader effort to define the adult-child interaction strategies that support young children’s learning. In this vein, Amy Powell (1990/1991) explored the importance of being responsive to children’s needs and feelings, using research on the factors of intrinsic motivation as a rationale for responsive teaching strategies. Inspired by the compelling and heartfelt expressions I heard from children during disputes, I began in 1989 to take a more in-depth look at conflicts in the classroom. I developed new teaching strategies as I worked with my own preschool students at the Giving Tree School, adapting from mediation practices used elsewhere with older children and adults.

In developing strategies to involve preschoolers in conflict resolution, I drew on many resources: the work of award-winning musician and author Sarah Pirtle (1998a, 1998b) and

For more information on active learning and other central elements of the HighScope approach to preschool education, see The HighScope Preschool Curriculum (Epstein & Hohmann, 2012).