

How Do You Model Conflict Resolution to your Children?

A very large part of our work as counsellors is helping children manage the difficulties they are experiencing in relationships. This includes everything from friendship issues in the playground to sibling rivalry, conflict with parents and teachers, family breakdown and loss. Almost all issues that cause unhappiness can be broken down to relationships and relationship difficulties. They are so important and children learn the relationship skills they need by watching how their parents interact with them, with each other and with other people.

The regular thread in our articles, regardless of the topic, is usually: **model the behaviours you want to see develop in your children.** In this week's article we are going to talk about conflict in relationships and how resolution can be modelled / taught.

How do you model conflict resolution to your children? In previous articles we have written about the damaging effects for children who witness hurtful, aggressive, and protracted discord at home, but this week we would like to talk about how you help your children manage the conflict they are experiencing in their own relationships.

The first thing is to acknowledge that conflict in relationships is normal and this is an important message to be communicate to children. 'It's ok to have a different opinion.' In fact conflict, well handled, can strengthen relationships. It can build trust, tolerance and respect. It can be a platform for teaching children patience and to take turns and to share. Good conflict resolution skills open their minds to new ideas and new ways of doing things. It can help them feel good about themselves and build confidence and self-esteem. Effectively managed conflict helps children get along better, be happier, have better friendships and even learn better at school.

Since children have different needs and preferences, experiencing conflict with others is unavoidable. They also have different ways of experiencing conflict and expressing their emotions. Many children (and adults) see conflict as a competition where there has to be a winner and a loser, whereby not getting your own way constitutes a defeat and getting your own way makes you a winner. This does not result in effective conflict resolution and does not build healthy relationships. It does promote win-lose behaviour, however. Those who believe they cannot 'win' often avoid conflict at all costs, usually give in and become submissive, and those who believe they can 'win' become bossy and dominating. Neither scenario builds a strong relationship.

When talking to children about managing conflict, animal analogies can be useful. People who are dominant or forceful may be likened to a shark or a lion, meaning they get their way

by being forceful or arguing or shouting. Someone who always gives in may be a likened to a teddy bear or a mouse, meaning they will avoid conflict and just want people to be happy and someone who avoids conflict all together may be likened to an ostrich or a tortoise in that they walk away, hide from the situation, change the subject or even leave the friendship.

The difficulty is that all these methods can work in avoiding a conflict, but it does not foster healthy and enduring relationships. Being forceful creates fear and resentment in others and may lead to the forceful one to bullying others to get what they want. Avoiding conflict by always giving in can lead to low self-esteem and anxiety and these children become more likely to be bullied. Building healthy respectful relationships requires your child to have some appropriate, assertive communication skills.

As adults, we play a significant role in how our children deal with conflict. If they see you getting your own way by being forceful and demanding, or conversely, by being meek and submissive and easily coerced to keep the peace, then your child is likely to do the same. Your child will look to you for advice, yes, but will be more influenced by what you do and how you react.

Often children are encouraged to compromise, to find some middle ground and negotiate terms of friendship. This is not necessarily a bad thing; ‘A little of what you want in exchange for a little of what I want.’ Children develop a strong sense of what is fair and often develop rules around ensuring fairness. But perhaps this is a little ‘fox’ like, where neither party believes their needs are being met.

Teaching your child to think like an ‘owl’ whereby they discover ways of helping each other get what they each want is a better way to go. Teaching your child to sort out the problem by developing and using their social and emotional skills is teaching them skills for life.

Here we revisit some of our regularly spruiked advice:

- Help your child (and model how) to manage his/her feelings through emotion coaching. Conflict conjures strong emotions like anger and anxiety which can get in the way of good conflict resolution. Learning to manage this will help them to keep their emotions separate from their decision making in the playground.
- Teach your child (and model) the importance of listening to and understanding the other persons point of view without blaming or judging. When you do this for your child (and they witness you doing this in your own relationships) they will be encouraged to listen to and understand what others have to say and how they feel.
- Teach your child (and model) clear and effective communication. Teach them how to speak up and say what they want/need without being forceful and demanding. For example, by using ‘I’ messages.
- Teach your child (and model) decision making skills; weighing up options and choices and considering possible outcomes.
- Praise your children for finding solutions and carrying them out, and support and encourage them in finding new solutions if the first one doesn’t work out.

Of course, learning and mastering these skills takes time, practice and maturity but it is never too young to start. With guidance and good modelling, children will develop their abilities and gradually learn how to resolve conflicts independently in a way that leaves them (and their friends) feeling heard, valued and respected.

Most importantly, the way you manage conflict in your home will be taken on board by your children and they will carry the skills they are learning from you into their adult lives. If, as you read our column, you are aware that your family struggles to manage conflict effectively, it is never too late to seek professional support through agencies such as CatholicCare, Anglicare or Relationships Australia.

The following articles were used in the preparation of this article and provide useful further reading.

<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/about-friendship/resolving-conflict/resolving-conflict-how-children-can-learn-resolve>

<https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/coaching-children-in-handling-everyday-conflicts/>

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/tips/ways-of-dealing-with-conflict/>

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