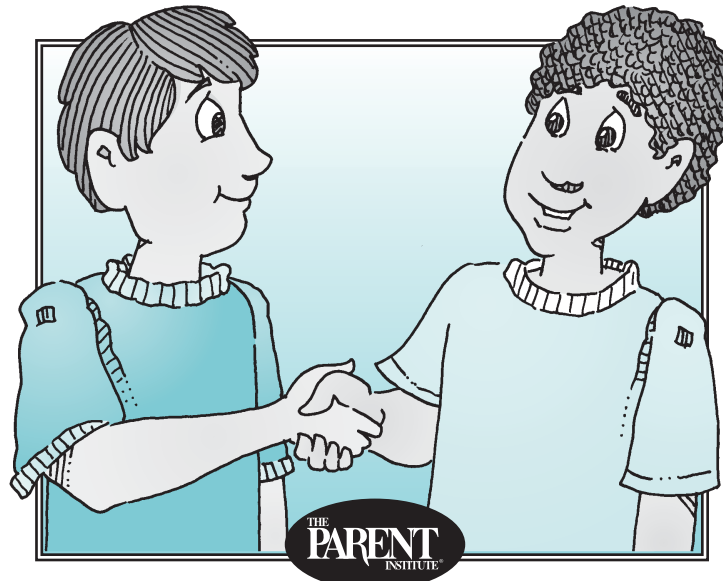


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# HELPING CHILDREN LEARN TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS

Ways Parents Can Help Their Children  
Do Better in School



THE  
PARENT  
INSTITUTE

One of a Series of Booklets for Parents

T H E ♦ D I S C I P L I N E ♦ S E R I E S

## Helping Children Learn To Resolve Conflicts

Whether it's a fight with a friend, a run-in with a teacher or an argument with parents—all children experience conflicts in their everyday lives. Conflicts can happen at home, in school or in the community.

Conflicts produce stress, hurt friends, tear families apart and disrupt school and learning.

But they don't have to. Children can learn to manage conflicts. They can learn to express their feelings in ways that lead to better decisions and better relationships. Working through conflicts—and not just avoiding them—can help children reach their goals.

Parents can encourage the skills and attitudes children need to resolve the conflicts they face.

This booklet is full of practical ideas to help you help your child learn how to resolve and even benefit from conflicts.

**Tip:** Don't expect to put all the ideas in this booklet into practice right away. The best way to make changes is one step at a time. Focus on one or two ideas—and don't forget to celebrate progress.



Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.



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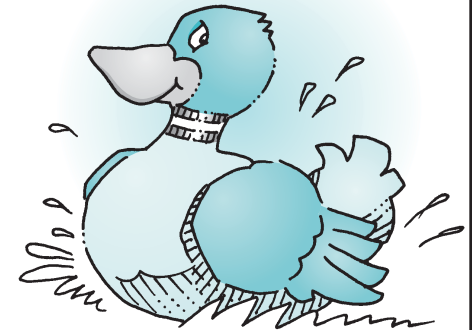
## Are You Setting a Good Example?

*"Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."*

— James Baldwin

Take this quiz to see what kind of conflict-solving example you are setting at home. Respond "Yes" or "No" to the following statements:

1. I try to live by the "Golden Rule," doing unto others (including my child) as I would have them do unto me. My actions show my child: "This is the way we treat one another, even if we're upset."
2. I keep the lid on hurtful anger. When I say things like, "You are so stupid!" my child may learn to deal with her own anger and conflicts in the same way—by lashing out and saying hurtful things.
3. I stay as calm as possible when I am angry with my child. I state my anger in a firm voice—without yelling—reminding my child of family rules and how I feel about what she has done.
4. I don't duck tough issues. Discussing problems as soon as they start shows my child how to keep them from exploding into bigger problems.
5. I admit it when I'm wrong. When I can admit an error, my child learns that she can, too. It teaches that part of growing up is taking responsibility for what you say and do. It stops many conflicts.



### How did you do?

If you responded "No" to any of these statements, use ideas from the quiz to set a better example for your child of how to resolve conflicts.

## 12 Things You Should NOT Do

Sometimes acting without thinking can make a problem worse. To teach your child how to resolve conflicts without getting angry or hostile:

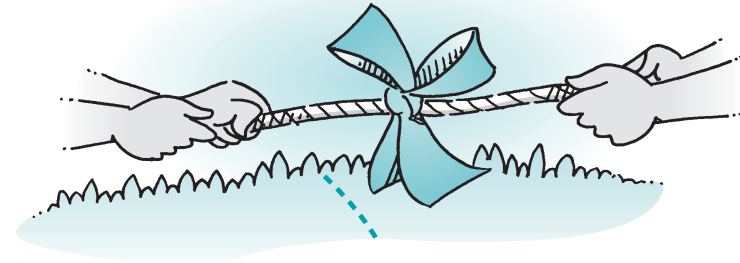
1. **Don't overemphasize** what your child is doing wrong.
2. **Don't demand more** of your child than he is capable of delivering.
3. **Don't ignore** your child's point of view.
4. **Don't tease** your child.
5. **Don't spy** on your child.
6. **Don't just talk *at*** your child instead of talking *with* him.
7. **Don't talk about** your child in his presence as if he doesn't exist.
8. **Don't let your child** watch a lot of screen violence.
9. **Don't use hitting,** yelling and angry words to discipline your child.
10. **Don't make all** of your child's decisions for him.
11. **Don't overprotect**—or show a lack of confidence in—your child.
12. **Don't overlook or excuse** your child's violent outbursts— or encourage bullying and fighting.



## Talk With Your Child About Ways To Handle Conflicts

People have choices in dealing with conflicts. Sometimes, depending on the situation, one way is better than another. Before conflicts arise, talk with your child about when it is appropriate to use each of the following:

1. **Avoidance.** This involves not addressing the problem at all. It is always good to take time to cool down and think. But if issues never get addressed, your child may lose the opportunity to express her feelings and opinions.
2. **Accommodation.** This involves yielding to the other person's point of view, wants and needs—and not asserting your own. It's useful when the issue at hand is not as important to your child as other issues.



3. **Compromise.** This involves seeking a middle ground solution that partially satisfies you and the other person. It's good for minor disagreements, or when collaboration fails.
4. **Confrontation.** This involves insisting on addressing the issue with the other person face-to-face. Of course, hitting, bullying, name-calling and other acts that hurt people physically or emotionally are *never* acceptable.
5. **Collaboration.** This involves working together to find a solution that will satisfy the needs of all parties. It is the ultimate in problem-solving. Everyone can achieve their goals. It's great for relationships.

## Teach Your Child 'Active Listening'

Conflicts are often just misunderstandings. To resolve a conflict, it's important to listen to the other person's thoughts and feelings and understand them. But usually people are so busy thinking about what they're going to say (or shout) next that they really don't hear what the other person is saying. That's why "active listening" is a great way to resolve a conflict.

Practice these "active listening" steps with your child:

- **Take turns speaking.** Only one person can talk at a time. The first speaker explains his view of the issue. "The thing that makes me mad is ... ." The other person listens.
- **Focus on the speaker.** Look at him. Nod your head. Concentrate on what he is saying.
- **Summarize what the speaker just said.** When the first speaker is finished, you must summarize what he said *before you can speak*. Say, "You said the main thing that makes you mad is ... (review his main points—no judging or evaluating—just summarize). Is that right?" The first speaker must approve your summary before it's your turn to speak.



It's amazing what happens when you summarize. The other person will feel understood. And both people will be less likely to get caught up in defending themselves and their positions.

- **Take your turn.** Now you talk and your partner listens carefully to you, summarizing what you said before he can speak again.

Active listening really works, and it's not limited to two people. Try it with the whole family when there's a disagreement. It teaches good listening—and it's a great way to resolve conflicts!

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## Help Your Child See Others' Strengths

If your child can't seem to get along with others, it could be her attitude. A child who thinks of others in a negative way often acts that way toward them. The reverse is also true.

Encourage your child to see a person's strengths instead of faults. Instead of viewing a person as rude, consider that she might be open and direct. Instead of bossy, the person might be thought of as a leader. A stubborn person might be determined. A lazy one may be someone who's able to relax. An angry person may be just standing up for her beliefs.

## Teach Your Child to Be Tolerant

To live peacefully in our diverse society, children need to be tolerant of others' ideas.

Find examples in newspapers or on TV of people with whom you disagree. Talk with your child about how to work with people who hold beliefs different from your own.

Tell your child that being tolerant of another person's beliefs does not mean she has to *accept* them.

Point out how some of your own views may also seem strange to others.



## Talk About Prejudice & Discrimination

One of the best things you can do is talk with your child about the injustice of prejudice and discrimination. You can:

- **Point out prejudice**, stereotyping and discrimination when you see it.
- **Make a firm rule** that your child should not exclude or tease people who are different from him.
- **Teach your child ready-made responses.** If another child is called a hurtful name, your child might say, "Don't call her that. Call her by her name." Your child's response to insults directed at him might be to show his maturity by saying nothing at all.
- **Set an example.** Say, "That kind of joke offends me."

## An 'Anger Diary' Can Boost Self-Understanding

Knowing what pushes his "anger buttons" can help your child prepare to handle anger constructively.

Does your child get angry when he's embarrassed? If someone looks at him the wrong way? When he doesn't get his way?

Or does he react to a tone of voice? A pointed finger? Bad calls in sports? Being accused of something he didn't do? Being treated unfairly? A threat to his status?

And how does your child usually deal with anger? Your child will find out if he records every instance of anger in an "anger diary."

Encourage your child to write down what made him angry and why, how he handled it, and what happened because of his actions. (Younger children can draw pictures.)

Discuss each incident with him. Be on his side if he's been treated unfairly. But be honest in pointing out when his judgment is off, his anger is inappropriate, or if he's violated someone else's rights.



## Use a TV Log to Talk About Anger

The next time your child watches TV, give her a TV log to fill out. Or watch TV together and record your reactions separately.

The goal is to develop your child's ability to recognize anger and to understand both good and unproductive ways of handling it.

Name of Show: \_\_\_\_\_

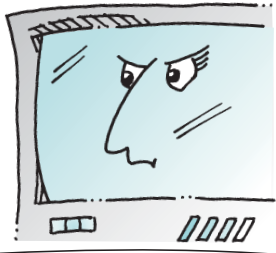
■ Describe a situation in which someone got angry.

■ Describe the physical signs of anger the person showed.

■ Describe what the person did to handle the anger. Was it effective?

■ If anger was handled aggressively, how much time did it take for anger to turn into aggression?

■ What could have been done to better manage the conflict and the anger it caused?


 A cartoon illustration of a television set. On the screen, a face with a furrowed brow and a downward-curved mouth is shown, representing anger. The TV has a few buttons and a speaker grille at the bottom.

## Let Your Child Help You With a Problem

One strategy for teaching your child about resolving conflicts is to share your own difficulties in managing conflicts.

When appropriate, ask your child what she would do with a problem you are facing. Talk about your feelings. And look together at the pros and cons of certain actions.

## Make Sure You're Not Raising a Bully

Most experts agree that children aren't born bullies. They learn to be aggressive through their environments—their families and peers, and what they read, hear and see in the media.

Answer "Yes" or "No" to the following questions:

- \_\_\_ 1. Are hitting, cursing and harassment allowed in our home?
- \_\_\_ 2. Do I allow my child to watch violence on television or in movies?
- \_\_\_ 3. Do I accept aggressive behavior as normal and expected?
- \_\_\_ 4. Do I allow conflicts to go unresolved so that anger builds up?
- \_\_\_ 5. Do I allow my child to tease or hurt our pet or other animals?
- \_\_\_ 6. Do I discipline my child by making threats?
- \_\_\_ 7. Do I avoid expressing love and affection for my child?

### How did you do?

If you answered "Yes" to any of the questions above, take a look at your child's behavior. Consider whether you are creating an environment in your home that fosters bullying.

## Protect Your Child Against Bullies

Here are some things you can do to help protect your child from bullies:

- **Help your child find safe routes** to and from school. Point out places along the way to go for help.
- **Help your child develop ways** to stand up for himself without losing his temper.
- **Watch for signs that your child** is being bullied—withdrawal, loss of appetite, a drop in grades, not wanting to go to school, bruises, torn clothing, or a need for "extra" school supplies or lunch money. Talk with your child immediately if you suspect a problem.
- **Inform school officials** immediately if there's a problem. Record dates, times, names and what happened.



## Use Humor to Stop Arguments

The next time your kids are fighting about which TV show to watch—or about anything they normally fight over—try this:

For five minutes, have the fighters switch roles. Each has to present the other's point of view as clearly and fairly as possible.

Odds are, they'll start laughing and make up. Better yet, they may come up with a compromise solution both parties like.

## Set Ground Rules for Settling Conflicts

- **Choose a convenient time.**
- **Focus on the problem, not the person.**
- **Share important information.**
- **Listen with an open mind.** Show that you are listening.
- **Treat the other person with respect** at all times.
- **Avoid name-calling, blaming, sneering, interrupting, putting someone down, judging, trying to get even, bringing up the past, and making excuses.**
- **Work on a solution.**
- **Follow through** to correct problems after a solution is agreed upon.

## Be Sure Your Child Can Recognize Danger

Tragically, in recent years we have seen an increase in violence by and against children. The use of handguns, assault weapons, knives, gang conflict and the low value some people place on human life make it important for children to be able to recognize danger and take steps to avoid it.

Talk with your child about places and situations to avoid. Teach her not to provoke someone who has a weapon—apologize, even if she doesn't mean it; give up money or possessions without a fight; take whatever action is necessary to stay safe.

Talk about where she can get help if it is needed—"Go to a nearby store, a neighbor's house or apartment. Ask someone to call the police."

## Help Your Child See the Positive Side of Criticism

Everyone must face some criticism. And sometimes criticism can even be helpful.

A coach's criticism can help a child learn to hit a curve ball. A teacher's criticism can improve a child's writing or behavior.

If your child is being criticized, it doesn't have to end in a fight. Remind her to think about the purpose of the criticism. Is it "good criticism?" Can she use it to help her do something better?

If so, have her try to listen carefully. Then have her ask for specific suggestions about how she might change.



## Teach Your Child to Disagree Agreeably

Children can learn to respect others' opinions, even if they don't agree with them. Saying, "I don't agree with what you said," is fine. Saying, "You're a stupid jerk to think that," is not.

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## Share Grievances to Deal With Anger

The best way to deal with conflict is with a cool, clear head. Your child can get a grip on anger by "venting" to somebody else. Encourage your child to talk to people he trusts about what's bothering him. Having somebody listen can help him calm down, clear his mind and see situations more logically. Sometimes just talking out loud can help. The next time your child feels overcome with anger, suggest talking to:

- A friend.
- A parent, sibling or other family member.
- A teacher, guidance counselor or the principal.
- Another adult.
- A pet.
- A stuffed animal.



### What To Do If Your Child Is Being Teased to Tears:

Children can tear each other apart with their words. Here are some things you can do to help ease your child's pain:

1. **Listen and acknowledge** your child's feelings. Say, "I know it hurts," or, "That isn't nice, is it?"
2. **Tell your child not to react.** That's what a teaser wants. And "come-backs" usually just give teasers more ammunition.
3. **Remind your child** that teasers are very immature. They are trying to be cool by being cruel.
4. **Encourage your child to join groups** of students who have things in common with him. He'll have a better chance to make friends who will support him.
5. **Call a teacher if the situation becomes critical.** Let the teacher know what's happening and ask how the school can help.



## Here's Where to Go For Outside Help

**S**ome conflicts just can't be solved by the people involved. If this happens, here's where you can go for help:

- A teacher, counselor or school principal.
- Your family doctor or religious leader.
- The information section of your telephone directory or online. Look for names and phone numbers of local agencies that may be able to help.

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You can help your child learn to resolve conflicts—but it's important to be a “helper,” not a “fixer.”

Fixing your child's problems for her robs her of the chance to:

- Manage her feelings.
- Think about others.
- Discover that cooperation really works.

When children learn to work out their own conflicts, they are well on their way to success in school—and in anything they do!



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