

Understanding & Resolving Conflicts

Teacher's Guide

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Program Overview

This program outlines a variety of conflict resolution techniques and demonstrates to viewers the pros and cons of each. By showing a range of scenarios that involve conflict, youngsters will see how conflict resolution can be used in everyday situations. The program also provides a foundation of knowledge about communication and touches upon such topics as I-Messages, body language, communication roadblocks, active listening, and more.

Viewers will see that they can resolve conflict by avoiding, adjusting their opinions, confronting, compromising, or collaborating. They will understand that conflict itself is not bad, but that the way conflict is handled can be.

Learning Objectives

After completing the program and participating in discussion, students will be able to:

- describe a variety of options for resolving conflict;
- talk about the basics of how communication works;
- explain the pros and cons of various types of conflict resolution techniques;
- understand how active listening, I-Messages, and body language can improve communication; and
- appreciate that conflict itself is not bad.

Web Resources

About.com: Conflict Resolution, Conflict Avoidance, and Controversy Management. Offers informative articles on such topics as basic mediation, factors in conflict, peacemaking, problem solving tools, resolving everyday conflicts, and much more. <http://humanresources.about.com/od/conflictresolution/index.htm?terms=conflict+resolution>

Association for Conflict Resolution: Articles & Resources. Includes an extensive list of resources related to building consensus, conflict resolution education, ethics, and more. <http://www.acrnet.org/acrlibrary/archivesum.php?view=category>

Mediate.com. Provides a wealth of conflict resolution and mediation resources related to schools, youth, and the community. <http://www.mediate.com/>

Resolving Conflicts Productively. Outlines a line of ten goals for conflict resolution. <http://www.csmg.org/resources/tips/tips.htm>

Wikipedia: Conflict Resolution. Details the definition of conflict resolution and includes a number of cross-references to such related topics as mediation, conciliation, and arbitration, as well as links to pertinent resources. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_resolution

Part I: Understanding Conflicts

Kid 1: I gotta talk to you.

Kid 2: What's goin' on, man?

Kid 1: You get your report back?

Kid 2: You mean the history paper?

Kid 1: Yeah.

Kid 2: No, why?

Kid 1: Look at this, you pea brain!

Kid 2: Oh man! I'm in big trouble! I mean *big* trouble.

Kid 1: You're in big trouble? What about me? I get an F because you copied *my* paper. What are you, some kind of galactic idiot? You copy my paper and then turn it in to the same teacher?

Kid 2: I didn't copy your paper.

Kid 1: Oh yeah right, you didn't copy my paper. I saw you...

Narrator: People getting into an argument. It happens every day for any number of reasons...

Gail: Some friend you are. Thanks a lot!

Girl 2: What are you talking about?

Gail: Debbie said you told her about Friday night!

Girl 2: Come on, Gail, it's not like nobody knew. The whole school's been talking about it.

Gail: That's not true and you know it! You're supposed to be my best friend; you're not supposed to go blabbing about it all over the place. I trusted you...

Narrator: Arguments. Clashes. Conflicts. Whatever you call them, they happen to teens, children, to adults, even to entire nations. And they have for all of human history. Many view conflicts as something to be avoided. But if you think about it, conflicts are simply part of everyone's life, for several reasons. First, people simply see things differently...

Woman 1: I like it. I like it very much.

Woman 2: You like it?

Woman 1: Yes I do. Yes I do. Look at it; it's just beautiful. I mean, absolutely exquisite. Beautiful.

Woman 2: Ugly as sin!

Narrator:...and those differences can result in disputes. Moreover, people have different values - strongly held beliefs about what is and isn't important...

Blanche: Oh, Harold, I think we should buy it. Who could resist that styling?

Harold: Look at the sticker, Blanche. We can't afford it!

Narrator:...and sometimes those values clash. Harold values a balanced budget. Blanche, a stylish car. Another reason why disputes are a part of our everyday lives is that people sometimes have conflicting emotional needs...

Bully: Get out of the way, McAllister, you dweeb!

McAllister: A dweeb, huh? Let's see who's the dweeb!

Narrator:...For example, both these young men need to feel more powerful than those around them. And, when those emotional needs clash, a dispute follows. Finally, people get into conflicts because they want more things than are actually available. But, whatever the reason or reasons, conflicts, and this may surprise you, are neither good nor bad. It's how conflicts are handled that makes the difference...

...When they're handled poorly, the results range from the comical to the tragic. Today, with guns and other deadly weapons so readily available, tragic results regrettably have become more and more frequent...

...People handle conflict in various ways, but generally, the strife gets worse when they either confront the other party, adjust their opinions, or avoid aggressive or belittling behavior or attitudes...

Steven: Mark, my man. That has gotta be the ugliest shirt I have ever seen.

Narrator: ...In this instance, Mark avoids Steven's thoughtless, petty remark by pretending that his classmate's insult hasn't been hurtful...

Steven: I mean, where did you get this? Did you steal it from some bum on Skid Row?

Narrator: ...In addition to pretending that nothing hurtful has been said or done, another way people handle conflict, as we just said, is to adjust their opinions...

Steven: It's disgusting.

Mark: Yeah, I guess it is sort of ugly, isn't it.

Narrator: ...The problem with opinion adjustment is that the reasons for the conflict don't go away. Sometimes, they even get worse...

Steven: You're such a loser!

Steven's buddy: Loser!

Narrator: ...Now, let's move on to the third way people may handle conflict: confrontation. When individuals confront, they stand their ground hard, and then push back—sometimes with words, sometimes with physical threats, sometimes with both.

Girl 1: Patty said she saw you holding hands with Jeff at the mall yesterday.

Melissa: Yeah? So what? We like each other.

Girl 1: Stay away from him, you hear me?

Melissa: Nobody's gonna tell me what to do!

Girl 1: Oh yeah? How many guys have you stolen from your friends *this* week, Melissa?

Narrator: ...People who use confrontation see conflicts as a win-lose proposition. In this instance, somebody's going to "win" Jeff, and somebody's going to lose him. People who confront often are convinced that they're right and the other person is wrong. And, as we said, they often use threats or physical force or both to get what they want...

Melissa: If you think you can make me stay away from him then why don't you just try and we'll see what happens!

Narrator: ...Obviously confrontation does nothing to resolve the problem, either. Besides confrontation, opinion adjustment, and avoidance, there's another way people can handle their conflicts: a problem solving approach. One way to use problem solving is to work out a compromise.

Basketball Player 1: How long you guys gonna be using the court?

Basketball Player 2: I don't know guys, about 15 minutes before we stop for lunch. But, you know, we were here first, so if you're gonna play here, you gotta give it back to use when we return.

Basketball Player 1: How long you gonna be gone?

Basketball Player 2: I don't know. A half hour?

Basketball Player 1: Could you make it a few minutes longer - say, 45 minutes?

Basketball Player 2: What do you say, guys? All right, you got your 45 minutes.

Narrator: ...In a compromise, each party gets something and each gives up something. In this instance, one group gets to use the court a little longer than the other wanted. But, in return, it has agreed to leave when the first group returns. Compromises work as long as what's given up isn't very important to the person or persons who have surrendered it. Obviously, this group's having to leave the court after 45 minutes isn't that important to them...

...If you look at the business world, or at international politics, you'll see that leaders often try to fashion compromises, and sometimes those compromises do work, just like they do in daily situations on school basketball courts. They work when neither side feels that it has given up too much. But schoolyard, business, and diplomatic compromises can, and sometimes do, fail because one side or both sides feel it's not been dealt an even hand...

...Up to this point, we've seen that conflicts may occur when people see things differently, when they want more things than are available, and when they have different values and conflicting emotional needs. We've also seen that conflicts are a part of everyday life, and that they are neither good nor bad. Rather, it's how we handle conflicts, either by avoiding, adjusting our opinions, confronting, or compromising, that makes them either positive or negative experiences.

Part II: Resolving Conflicts

Narrator: Besides avoidance, opinion adjustment, confrontation, and compromise, there is another way to handle conflict. A way that many people involved in conflict resolution have used successfully. It's called collaboration, and it's a way to settle a dispute so that everyone involved wins...

...As with most things that are truly worthwhile, however, collaboration can be difficult. It requires that individuals involved in a disagreement look at the other party or parties in the dispute in a completely new way. And that may mean changing many long-held beliefs and behaviors, no small order. Specifically, it often requires each person to show a real interest and understanding of the other party's needs and points of view. In other words, it takes a sympathetic approach without giving up what's important to you. As difficult as that may be, many experts believe it's the best way to resolve conflicts...

...Collaboration also requires each person in the conflict be an effective communicator. To do that, it helps to know some basics of communication. Basically, the communication process can be broken down into four parts. First, the sender puts his or her thoughts into words. Second, the words form a message, which is sent out. Then somebody receives the message and figures out, or interprets, what the message means. Finally, there's feedback, a message that the receiver sends back to the original communicator. It sounds fairly simple, but it's not, because along the way, there are many ways for the message, even a single word, to be misinterpreted, its meaning blown away...

...In other words, the message sent out may, through various circumstances, become quite different once received. And that can cause major problems when people try to resolve a conflict...

...There are several reason why misinterpretations take place. For one, it's easy for people of different backgrounds to misunderstand each other. For example, when a very rich woman says she needs "good transportation," that message may be misinterpreted by someone whose background doesn't include daily rides in a long limousine...

...People who have unlike values, different views of what's important, correct, or morally right also may misunderstand each other's messages. For instance, they may agree that it's important to give to charity, but what kind of charity could be another matter altogether. Should they give money to the homeless, or to environmental causes? It all depends on what's valued...

...How people communicate may also result in misinterpretation. In some countries, direct eye contact while holding a conversation shows openness and directness, an award winning approach. But in other countries, direct eye contact may mean disrespect...

...Then there's the matter of people viewing the same thing but seeing it quite differently. Some people look at this drawing and see a young woman. There's her nose, her cheek, her chin, and her necklace. Others look at it and see an old woman. There's her big nose, her left eye, her pointed chin, and her mouth...

...So, which is it? It depends on how you look at it, an important point when trying to resolve conflicts. From whose viewpoint do you look at the problem? What all this means is that, during the communication process, we can't assume that the listener is going to interpret what we've said as we've intended. Skillful diplomats, politicians, and business leaders take great care, therefore, to ask for clear and precise details when they communicate with each other about matters that could possibly lead to a conflict...

...They also are careful to show respect for each other, because respect among people helps enormously in the communication process. Moreover, many are aware of, and thus try to avoid the various roadblocks that can prevent good communication...

...The first of those roadblocks is ordering. People tend to stop listening when they're ordered to do something...

Girl 1: You *will* lend me your CD collections, right?

Girl 2: Play third base, and don't give me any excuses if you muff it.

Boy 1: I'm not asking - I'm telling! You're coming with me and that's that!

Narrator: ...Threats are another way to kill good communication...

Girl 1: You'd better tell me who said that, or you'll be sorry you were even born.

Girl 2: If you don't give me that tape back, and I mean now, you will never borrow anything from anyone again!

Narrator: ...Lecturing, preaching, and giving unwanted advice are still other roadblocks. People tend to tune out those methods of communication no matter how well intended...

Boy 1: It's your duty to tell Miss Anderson what happened.

Girl 1: You oughta go over there right now and get it over with.

Girl 2: You should do it - you know that!

Boy 1: Okay, okay... I'm gonna tell you where *you* went wrong.

Narrator: ...Moreover, when judging takes place, people tend to get defensive, and the message is lost in "I am not!" or "it is not!" kind of responses...

Girl 1: You're spoiled rotten, you know that?

Girl 2: What did you do to your hair? It looks awful! Ughhhh.

Boy 1: You are *crazy* if you think I'm gonna go along with that.

Narrator: ...Failing to acknowledge the other person's feelings hampers communication, too, because feelings are an important part of each individual. People are entitled to their feelings...

Girl 1: Hey, you shouldn't feel that way.

Girl 2: You'll feel better after you get a good night's sleep. Believe me, you will.

Boy 1: You should feel ashamed, feeling like that.

Narrator: ...Diagnosing often results in the same reaction.

Girl 1: You're just trying to get people to feel sorry for you.

Girl 2: You get angry because you can't stand for people to be honest with you.

Narrator: ...And then there's prying, the final roadblock to good communication.

Girl 1: Now why in the world would you wanna do that?

Girl 2: And who gave *you* permission?

Boy 1: And when, may I ask, do you think you'll find enough time?

Narrator: ...Now that you know some of the major roadblocks to avoid, let's move on to the ways you can create good communication. It helps to be an active listener, perhaps more than anything else. Anyone can be an active listener if he or she practices a few simple techniques, such as being empathetic, that is, putting yourself in the other person's place to understand how she or he feels...

...You can also use what's called body language to be an active listener. You can, for example, use facial expressions and gestures to show concern. Your posture can show your interest also. If you lean forward, for instance, the unspoken message you're sending out says that you really want to know what the other person has to say...

...Besides body language, you can use so-called verbal cues to let the other person know you're actively listening to what she or he has to say. Some verbal cues encourage the other person to continue talking. An example would be, "oh, tell me more about it." Other verbal cues may ask the person to clarify what she or he has said...

Teen 1: I don't understand what you mean.

Narrator: ...Or they may simply restate what's been said...

Teen 1: So what you're saying is you thought I'd given the sweater to you, not loaned it, right?

Teen 2: Right.

Narrator: ...Still other verbal cues reflect the other party's feelings...

Teen 1: So you feel like I went back on my promise, and you're really upset about it—is that right?

Narrator: ...When you summarize what the other person has said, you also show that you've listened to every word spoken...

Teen 1: Okay, let me get this straight. We were talking about trading clothes, and when I brought my sweater over, you didn't give me anything in return, so you thought it was like a gift, right?

Narrator: ...Finally, active listeners acknowledge the feelings of the other person. As we've said, everyone is entitled to his or her feelings...

Teen 1: Boy, I can see how angry you were when I asked you to give it back.

Narrator: ...Acknowledging those feelings, however, doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with the viewpoint. Feelings and viewpoints are two separate things. But by showing that you've listened, you've made a favorable resolution much more likely...

Teen 2: I'll tell you what. I'll give it back to you if you let me borrow it sometimes, okay?

Teen 1: Sure, no problem.

Narrator: ...So far, we've said that effective communication involves active listening and avoiding communication roadblocks. It also means sending clear I-Messages...

...I-Messages contain at least three parts, possibly four. First, you state your feelings...

Girl: I feel angry

Narrator: ...for example. Next you describe what has happened to you that has prompted the emotion...

Girl: When I'm shoved in line.

Narrator: ...Then you tell the effect or possible effect of the other person's behavior...

Girl: Because I might trip over somebody.

Narrator: ...Finally, you can add what you need, in terms of a new behavior...

Girl: I need to be given a little more space.

Narrator: ...Another example would be...

Girl: I feel frustrated when people borrow my books and don't return them when they promise, because I can't finish my homework on time. I need to get things back when I expect them so I can keep on my schedule.

Narrator: ...Notice that the word "you" never appears in an I-Message. In that way, the listener has no reason to become defensive or to begin an argument. Now, let's return to a previous example to show how an I-Message can help a conflict from getting out of hand. First, without the I-Message...

Gail: Thanks a lot!

Girl 2: What are you talking about?

Gail: Debbie said you told her about Friday night!

Girl 2: Come on, Gail, it's not like nobody knew. The whole school's been talking about it.

Gail: That's not true and you know it! You're supposed to be my best friend; you're not supposed to go blabbing about it all over the place. I trusted you...

Narrator: ...Now, let's replay the scene with an I-Message...

Gail: I felt so angry when I heard Debbie found out about last Friday night. Now everyone knows, and I can't show my face around here. I'm still angry. I really need to know that my friends be able to keep my secrets.

Girl 2: I'm sorry, Gail. I knew I blew it as soon as it slipped out. I promise I won't do it again. I'll stick by you.

Narrator: ...Much better. As we said, conflicts happen, but it's how they're handled that makes all the difference. If you avoid, adjust your opinion, or confront, the conflict probably won't go away. If you compromise, or, better yet, collaborate - that is, work together so both parties feel they've come out ahead - everyone can be a winner. But compromise and collaboration require work; they don't come easily. They require changes in viewpoint and, for many, perhaps most of us, changes in behavior. They require respect and understanding. But, as we said, few things truly worthwhile come easily. Resolving conflict so everyone wins is no exception, but it can be done. In fact, people do it all the time, and the results are great.