



# Why Children Fight and How to Help Them Resolve Conflicts Peacefully

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Conflicts are an inevitable part of life, whether you're an adult or a child. Realizing that there is a gap between our expectations and those of other people can feel frustrating and unfair. Children often experience conflicts in social interactions as they widen their social world through school and friends. During such times, caregivers can help children manage their intense feelings and arrive at solutions to resolve conflicts.

## Why conflicts among children emerge



Getting used to the presence of other people and acknowledging their selfhood is a part of growing up. However, that process is often a bumpy ride as children learn to negotiate between their own needs and those of others.

Children can be at odds with each other due to an inability to share toys, lack of agreement on rules of play, impatience in taking turns, competition, or more extreme situations like bullying. They can also quarrel with grown-ups if either party fails to have

their expectations met. We can use these instances to teach children to manage conflicts and their own reactions to them. Conflict resolution is an essential life skill that will form the base for their social relationships even as adults.

## Our roles as caregivers

No two people are the same, and that includes children as well. While their responses are affected by the developmental milestones related to their ages, each child's personality and early experiences will influence their reaction to conflicts.

Parents may go through a range of emotions when they see their children embroiled in conflicts. For instance, it is understandable to feel concerned and angry if your child is facing bullying or misbehavior by another child. Alternatively, if your child is the one being unkind, it can be frustrating when they do not get along with other people or refuse to play by the rules. On the whole, no parent likes to see their child experience distress as an outcome of conflict. This can make it tempting to jump in and either take your child away from the situation or solve it for them.

However, this eagerness may prove unhelpful if we focus solely on soothing their emotional pain rather than also teaching them to manage and resolve such conflicts. After all, these quarrels offer us opportunities to help children understand their emotions, enhance problem-solving abilities, and develop empathy for others. Rather than telling them what to do, we can use these moments to engage children by appealing to their curious and creative sides.





Besides, children learn the most by observing their parents. So we not only guide children to resolve their own conflicts but also model this resolution behavior when we deal with our conflicts. The importance of calming down and collaboratively solving a problem would be easier for a child to understand and emulate if they see their caregivers adopting that approach regularly in their own interactions.

### Conflicts can help them grow

Donald Winnicott, an influential pediatrician and psychotherapist, observed that the capacity to feel concerned is an essential milestone in gaining emotional maturity. This complex process means that the child learns to recognize that they can destroy or hurt things and people when they experience anger. This recognition helps them develop a sense of guilt for when they give in to these negative impulses. As we can imagine, it can be pretty difficult to admit that we have these destructive abilities. According to Winnicott, what makes this realization easier to bear for children is discovering that they also have the ability to be constructive, find solutions, and make amends. We can help them through these discoveries by accepting their emotional responses with empathy, which will help children accept these for themselves.

Dealing with emotional arousal: Conflicts lead to heightened emotions, which limits the ability to think and make decisions. So, the first step is to teach children to deal with these intense feelings. Help your child to recognize the signs of intense feelings during a

conflict, like rapid breathing, a faster heartbeat, and feeling flushed. At this moment, we cannot expect children to specify what they are feeling and why. The focus here should be on the intensity of their feelings, and the goal is to prevent this from overwhelming them. Luckily, some pretty easy relaxation techniques can help both children and adults to step back and cool down:

- Take 10 deep breaths; start again if required
- Count to 10 with your fingers
- Stand up and focus on how the floor feels under your feet
- Walk away for a time-out, after respectfully letting the person know



Recognizing and describing emotions: Once the child has calmed down enough to be able to think, encourage them to talk about how they are feeling. Since children do not have a complex emotional vocabulary yet, they may need your help to describe their emotions. Let them know that it is okay to feel angry, sad, frustrated, nervous, confused, or scared at the moment. This will not only provide them with the words to describe their experience but also help them accept their emotions, which is necessary for them to be able to deal with them. The more comfortable kids get with experiencing emotions, the easier they will find it to accept them and take responsibility for them.



**Emotional intelligence** is not simply about recognizing our own emotions but also those of others. Encouraging the child to put themselves in the other person's shoes and trying to see the situation from their eyes can be a great lesson in flexible thinking. This also helps them respond to conflicts with empathy. Studies have shown that aggression and violence occur when people cannot see the emotional impact of their actions on others. So teaching children to read other people's emotions through their body language, facial expressions, and language is a helpful exercise. For instance, "Sophia has stopped playing and is sitting away from the other kids. She seems to be upset. Could it be because she didn't get a turn at the swing?"

**Problem-solving:** When they begin to see the other person as an equal who feels similar feelings of being hurt and angry, it becomes easier for the child to come up with solutions to the problem. Questions like "What can we do to solve this problem?" or "What's the best solution that will be fair for everyone?" will invite the child to shift their attention from their own emotions to those of everyone and from these emotions to a more thought-based decision-making that considers ideas like fairness. Here, it helps to teach kids that problem-solving means listening to everyone's ideas and mutually deciding on the best course of action. We must also categorically discourage aggressive behavior like hitting, pushing, or name-calling, and nudge children towards using words rather than actions for problem-solving.

While this problem-solving approach works in situations of small conflicts, extreme situations like bullying, where there is a clear power difference, warrant more active adult intervention. If your child is being bullied, [read this post for 7 ways to stop it](#). Alternatively, check out [this post](#) if you need help teaching your child to not bully.

**Making amends:** Finally, after a conflict has occurred, and the child better understands the consequences of their actions, it is normal and even healthy for them to feel guilty for their outburst. We should guide them to take responsibility and mend fences: "How do you think Jake feels after your quarrel?" or "What can you do to help him feel better?" Reaching out with compassion and actively repairing the relationship helps children to move on from the episode and gives them a sense of autonomy in contrast to the helplessness they felt during the conflict.



As part of their emotional development, children are actively engaged in developing their selfhood and learning to recognize it in others as well. This learning curve can involve conflicts, which is how children adjust their expectations and understanding of the world and other people. As caregivers, we can help them make sense of their overwhelming feelings and use language to describe their experience, teach problem-solving skills, and encourage them to make amends. When the going gets tough, remember that children will need a lot of practice and hand-holding to be able to use these strategies. You giving them those opportunities for exploration and appreciating their efforts can help them navigate these challenges with confidence and empathy.

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