

PRESCHOOLERS

Resolving conflict

By Melanie Romero

AS PARENTS, and as teachers, we learn to use the theory of “natural consequences” to show young children that mistakes beget corrections. If they color on the walls, they must help to clean it. But what is the natural consequence for hitting a friend or grabbing a toy?

Let’s start with what *not* to do. Ignoring the problem by distracting the child or removing the child from the setting is a temporary solution that does not teach that the action was wrong. Trying to solve a problem between children by making a rule (“no hitting” or “share your toys”) doesn’t teach them to take responsibility for their misdeeds. Requiring children to say “I’m sorry” or making them give back toys they have taken from other children will teach them to rely on you for the answers to their problems. Time-outs or other forms of punishment tell children they are bad, or have done something bad, and do not teach children *why* their behavior was wrong. Punishment creates children with low self-esteem who are afraid to take risks.

To create confident, creative problem solvers, adults must allow young children to be active participants in the process. When



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a problem or conflict between children occurs, follow these six steps:

- 1 Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions. Get on their level, between them as needed. Use a calm voice and gentle touch.
- 2 Acknowledge the child’s feelings: “I see we have a problem. It looks like Jordan is sad.” Take any item that may be causing the conflict, saying, “I need to hold this while we talk about the problem.”
- 3 Ask, “What is the problem?” and allow each child time to answer to the best of his or her ability.
- 4 Restate the problem as heard or interpreted: “Jordan says you took his car. Tommy says he had it first.”
- 5 Ask, “How are we going to solve this problem?” Allow the children time to think of solutions. At first they will say nothing or something like: “I can have it” or “He can give it to me.” If given

the words to use, and allowed time and opportunity to practice, they will begin to say things like, “He can have it when I’m done” or “I’ll take a turn and then he can take a turn.” Or they might think to find a similar item for the other child to use. The solution must be accepted and acceptable for both children. Think “win-win.”

- 6 Give follow-up support: “We solved this problem!” Stay nearby while the solution is implemented.

Conflict resolution is the natural consequence for social mistakes. Young children do not intentionally misbehave, but they do make a lot of mistakes. It is our job as the adults in their lives to guide them toward resolving and repairing their own conflict.

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