

Conflict Resolution in Children and Adolescents

Conflicts, both large and small, are part of the ordinary fabric of our lives. Regardless of our age, we deal with conflict on almost a daily basis. What we need to learn is not how to avoid conflict, but how to resolve it effectively. The process of resolving conflict is called conflict resolution.

It is indeed a process, one that can be both learned and taught to others. In our brief time, we cannot cover the subject thoroughly, but we can give you some guidelines and help you determine when you might need additional help to manage a conflict that involves your child or adolescent.

The first step in resolving conflict is to establish control of your own feelings and responses and then begin to help your child get control of his or her reactions to the situation. Controlling your own response is not always easy but it is essential if conflicts are to be resolved satisfactorily. Throwing a parental temper tantrum may be temporarily gratifying, but it will only lead a child or teen to imitate your response and continue their pattern of unacceptable behavior. Parents need to both teach and practice good conflict resolution skills.

The basic pattern of conflict resolution is similar for children and adolescents. The only differences are due to the relative maturity and communication skills of the two age groups.

In dealing with children in conflict, we want to do the following:

- Avoid any physical discipline since it will worsen, not improve, your child's behavior. The best "punishment" may be a three to six minute time-out period with the child sitting in a place where he or she can regain control after an outburst.
- After each time-out, and several time-outs may be necessary, spend time discussing the conflict with your child. Then work with your child on developing coping strategies for the future such as counting to ten or walking away from an argument.
- If someone has been hurt or their property damaged by the child's outburst, have the child offer restitution to the offended party. This could take the form of work or chores that benefit the one who has been hurt or suffered a loss.
- Provide praise and attention when the child exhibits good conflict resolution behavior.

For teenagers, the process is similar to dealing with a child but has more complexity due to their greater age. The time-out session is whatever cool-down period is necessary for the teenager to regain control of his or her feelings and emotions. Parents should avoid any confrontation until the teenager has cooled off and can discuss the conflict rationally. (continued)

When you talk, ideally in private, calmly establish the relevant facts and explore why the situation occurred. Then, together, develop an appropriate form of punishment or restitution, if necessary, and discuss strategies to avoid a recurrence of the incident.

In dealing with conflict, parents need to recognize when the circumstances require evaluation and assistance from a mental health professional. It is possible that other complicating conditions may be present such as Conduct Disorder or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. (You may want to listen to other tapes in our library on these subjects.) If the techniques mentioned do not bring good results after several attempts, or if the child's behavior becomes dangerous to himself or others, then it may be necessary to get a professional opinion about what to do next.

In seeking help, the first step is to have the child thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended. Treatment can include counseling, therapy or medication, depending on the needs of the particular child.

This public service has been brought to you by Foundations Behavioral Health.