

# IS CONFLICT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN?

Conflict is a natural part of human life. Often parents and teachers will try to arrange a child's life to avoid potential conflict. For example, sometimes we only let certain children play together or we try to keep siblings apart, playing in different parts of the house. While this may feel like the right thing to do, it is really a disservice to our children. Children need to learn how to deal with conflict respectfully and how to negotiate fairly and they need the time and opportunity to practice these skills.

Children look to adults as their models for how to deal with anger and frustration. If we yell, punish, or humiliate others we send a message to children that these are acceptable ways to treat others. We cannot expect children to be respectful and kind if we are not. We cannot expect children to listen to each other and to work things out calmly if we do not. Children need guidance in the difficult process of conflict resolution. You can be their mentor and guide if you remember:

- Young children are egocentric. You cannot expect them to understand the feelings and needs of others while they are trying to understand their own feelings and needs;
- Young children live fully in the present, what they want and what they feel at any moment is their world at that moment. Asking them to share or to wait until tomorrow is extremely difficult;
- Having realistic expectations based upon your children's level of social and cognitive development will allow you to help them make sense of conflict and anger.

When children get angry with each other and get into a conflict, here are some simple ways to help them work through it:

- Speak with your children firmly and calmly and at their eye level.
- Speak simply and honestly. Questions like "Why did you hit Johnny?" are not helpful. It is simply not OK to hurt people. Let them know that you are there to keep them safe.
- Encourage your children to talk to the person they are angry with about how they feel and what happened. (Give them time to figure out the words they want to say. Don't speak for them.)
- Encourage them to come up with a solution to the problem, helping them to figure out what would be fair for everyone.

Conflict isn't easy and it can be scary. As parents, we can give a great gift to the world by helping our children learn how to deal with conflict honestly and respectfully.