

Sorting out conflict together

Van's friend Eli had come over to play. They played outside for a while and then decided to play a new game on the computer. From the other room Van's father could hear the sounds of the computer and the boys. They were obviously enjoying the game.

But after a while something changed. Eli was starting to get frustrated. "It's my turn, Van," said Eli. "Come on! It's my turn," he said again. "Stop being such a pain. You've already had a turn," Van replied. "But you've had more. You're hogging it!" said Eli. "No I'm not," said Van. "Anyway you always hog the games at your house." "I do not!" yelled Eli.

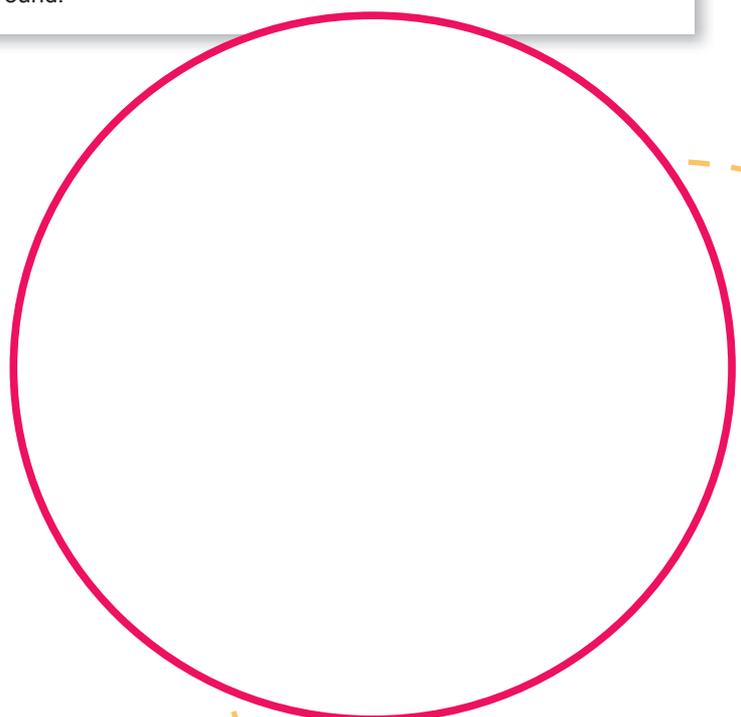
It was getting serious, and Van's father decided it was time to help them sort it out. "What's going on, boys?" he asked them. "Nothing," said Van. "Van won't let me have a turn," said Eli. "I'm sure if we talk about this we can work it out," said Van's father.

Whether they get into an argument over a game, what to watch on TV, or whose turn it is to clean up, conflicts are common in children of primary school age. Conflict is a normal part of human relationships. Sometimes conflicts blow over, but sometimes they don't.

Adults may believe it's best to let children sort things out by themselves. The problem with this is that often children get into conflict because they don't have the skills to solve it themselves. If left alone the conflict gets bigger. Usually then the person who is louder, stronger or more aggressive wins.

Children do need adult help to solve conflicts. The best way to help them is not to simply tell them what they should do. It works better to act as a 'coach' and help children find a solution that suits everybody. When children work out solutions this way, they learn valuable skills that can help them resolve conflicts more effectively. With good coaching they can learn to use the skills of conflict resolution even when you're not around.

The things that children get into conflict over may seem minor to adults but they are real issues for children.



Skills for conflict resolution

The skills needed for effective conflict resolution include skills for managing emotions, as well as thinking skills for problem-solving and communicating with others.

The key conflict resolution skills are:

- being able to control angry or anxious feelings
- learning to listen even when you disagree
- understanding the other person's opinions and feelings
- being able to think of different solutions
- exchanging ideas with the other person
- finding 'win-win' solutions.

How parents and carers can help

Using the steps of conflict resolution to coach children to come to their own solutions helps them learn the skills they need. Learning to resolve conflict successfully takes good coaching and lots of practice.

Unresolved conflicts can spoil friendships and affect children's confidence. When conflicts are left simmering they can negatively affect children's mental health and wellbeing.

Coaching children to resolve conflict

Step 1

Help children see conflict as a problem they can sort out fairly, with help, for example: "It looks like there's a problem here. I'm sure if we talk about it we can sort it out."

Step 2

Get each child to explain how they see the conflict. Get them to focus on what they want or need, and what their concerns or worries are, rather than blaming the other person.

Step 3

It is often helpful for the coach to then re-state the concerns of both parties, for instance: "So, Eli, you're worried that you won't get a turn; and Van, you're trying to make it to the next level of the game and you're worried that if you stop now you won't get to it."

Step 4

Get children to suggest at least three different solutions, such as: "What are some ways to solve this so you can all feel okay about it?" If they can't think of any, offer some ideas for them to think about.

Step 5

Help children agree on a solution that will work and put it into action.

Step 6

Praise them for sorting it out.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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