

Children and Conflict

All of us have seen children in the midst of conflict. Sometimes our own discomfort with conflict makes us try to get rid of it as soon as possible. We might be tempted to give children our own solution to the problem, or separate arguing children, or take away the thing they're fighting over. At SYC we believe that having and settling conflicts helps children to learn about themselves and others and to develop their problem solving skills. We encourage and support them while they work out their disagreements.

As an example, young children often want the same toys others are using. It's common to see one child take a toy out of another child's hand, leaving the toyless one crying and calling an adult for help. These kinds of conflicts are inevitable and maybe even necessary as children learn and grow into people who can negotiate on their own without our help. When a child comes to us to tell us what has happened, we don't dismiss it as tattling. We know that children come to us for help with problems they can't handle alone. There are several things we would do in response.

- View the situation as a chance to help both children learn how to live cooperatively with other people. We're not born with this skill. Having this attitude eliminates the urge to lecture, blame, make children apologize or dole out consequences.
- Support both children with touch, eye contact, listening and gentle talking
- Make statements and ask questions about behaviors and feelings in a matter-of-fact way to get information. "You didn't like that." "You wish you could have this toy." "What do you think we should do?" Having their feelings acknowledged and accepted helps children move toward solving the problem.
- Help the children say how they want to settle the problem and help them carry it out. Sometimes they have ideas and we just have to help them agree on one. At other times we offer ideas, especially early in the year or with younger children, or with children who are too upset to name a solution. In a typical property dispute, an SYC teacher might offer to make a turn-taking list for a desired toy. Once children have been at SYC for a while, they trust the list and even suggest it themselves to solve an ownership issue.

Children can learn several things by dealing with conflicts, and we adults who had our early conflicts handled for us can learn some of these missed lessons when we help them. First, children can see that one way to solve a problem is to get an adult to help. If young children learn this early, maybe they'll continue coming to their parents for help with more complex problems as they get older.

We also want children to know that stating their feelings and wishes clearly can help them solve a problem with another person. Children can learn that their feelings are real and valued, even their hard-to-have feelings. They can also find that it's possible to disagree with someone, express their feelings, solve the problem and still be friends. Then, they can take all the solutions they thought of and add them to their list of strategies to try the next time. This helps them become more independent social problem solvers.

Disagreements will happen wherever there are young children. If we adults remember what children can learn from handling conflict, then we'll naturally support their efforts, just as we do when they take their first walking steps. They only need our help until they've had enough experience to negotiate alone. This important skill will be valuable to our children all their lives.

...Angela LaMonte, SYC Teacher

