

Making Friends with Conflict

Use this tool to support children's ability to work through conflict toward a satisfying resolution.

Step 1: Validate children's emotions

- I see you are really upset.
- How did you feel when ____?
- I see how you are trying to ____ Would you like support to try again?
- I know it's hard, but I know you can do this.

Step 2: Consider asking children to...

slow down

- What are you trying to do?
- Tell me more about ____.
- Did you notice when ____?
- I'm noticing ____ and I'm wondering ____.
- Do you need some time to cool down before we solve this?

listen

- Did you hear ____? Were you aware ____?
- Why don't you check in with ____ and ask about their plan?

use metacognition

- What were you expecting or hoping would happen?
- What were your intentions?
- What surprised you?

become more self-aware of their words and actions

- I heard you say ____.
- Did you hear what ____ said?
- Can I take a guess about what is going on for you?
- Do you see ways to snap your ideas together?

engage in playful risk-taking

- What do you think should happen next?
- Would you like to try approaching the other person in this new way?

Step 3: Reflect

- What happened?
- How did it go?
- What did you learn?
- What would you keep doing/stop doing?

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Children need to be comfortable navigating conflict.

Conflict is inevitable in life, yet no one likes it. Creating the conditions for children to be genuinely engaged in their work and ideas opens the door to strong emotions. Developing the confidence to move through these emotions productively is one of the most important habits of mind children can learn in school. Young inventors thrive in a caring and creative community in which sharing ideas is highly valued, conflict is recognized as a natural part of life, and strong emotions are validated and normalized.



Suggested Time Frame

5-15 minutes. Timing can vary.

When and How

Use this tool when children need support when dealing with conflict.

Tips and Variations

- When you see children in conflict, move closer physically but give them an opportunity to work through their problems before jumping in. A quick and silent way to make sure everyone feels heard afterwards is to check in with the child(ren) in distress and ask for a signal of two thumbs up, to the side, or down with regard to their feelings.
- No one thinks well when feeling strong emotions. Children often are better problem-solvers once they have had a chance to cool off. Cooling off should not be a punishment, but a powerful and responsible decision for the good of everyone.
- Remember that you are not there to take away the hard feelings, but to help children stay in a productive and safe space where they can have big emotions and still take risks to solve problems.
- Be honest and transparent about your own processes of working through conflict and strong emotions in the classroom.
- Make and post a menu of children's problem-solving strategies in the classroom. Ask children to create visual icons to represent their strategies. Invite children to practice a strategy in the absence of conflict.
- If children seem particularly reluctant to take risks, try to figure out the source of their resistance. Does fear prevent them from taking a chance? Are they unfamiliar with the habit of persistence? What are their prior experiences with failure? What is their understanding of their own resilience? What is their connection to the word "challenge"? To unpack some of these terms, you might ask children, "What do you already know about the word, [challenge, failure, mistake, persistence, etc.]?" Other helpful questions include: "Which friends or materials will you play with today that might stretch your thinking? What did you tell your brain when it didn't work the way you wanted?"
- Children come to school with a wide variety of experiences with conflict, some of which may include trauma. Responding to each child's individual needs and histories is critical. Make a habit of asking yourself, "What is happening for this child?" rather than, "What is wrong with this child?"
- Use reflection and storytelling to make one person's experience with conflict something the whole group can learn from. Use [literature](#) to stimulate connections and to normalize experiences.

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