Supporting Learners with Conflict and Frustration

A protocol, principles, and teaching moves to support learners in navigating conflict

A protocol for addressing conflict during play[1]

▷ **Validate the emotion:** "I see you are really upset. How did you feel when _____?"

▷ **Slow things down:** "What were you trying to do? Tell me more about _____." "Let's take a minute of silence for everyone to jot down their thoughts and feelings."

▷ **Encourage listening:** "I heard you say _____." "Did you hear what ___ said?" "What is a question you might ask ___ to better understand where they're coming from?

▷ **Support problem-solving:** "How can you imagine this problem being solved?" "What ideas do you have?" "What's another strategy you can try?"

▷ **Reflect on what just happened:** "What were you hoping would happen?" "What surprised you?" "Do you see ways to resolve this conflict?"

Principles to keep in mind

▷ Children come to school with a variety of experiences with conflict, some of which may include trauma. Responding to each child's individual needs and history is critical. Make a habit of asking yourself, "What is happening for this child?" rather than, "What is wrong with this child?"

▷ Remember that you are not there to take away the hard feelings, but to help learners stay in a productive and safe space where they can experience difficult emotions and still take risks to solve problems. You can support this process by approaching it with a sense of curiosity and inquiry, rather than judgment.

▷ Strong emotions can sometimes interfere with clear thinking. Cooling off should not be a punishment, but a powerful and responsible decision for the good of everyone.

▷ If children seem particularly reluctant to take risks, try to figure out the source of their resistance. Is it fear? Lack of practice with persistence? Prior experiences with failure?

Possible teaching moves

▷ With your students, develop a set of norms for your classroom community. Consider including norms such as, "It is OK to disagree" and the "24-hour rule" ("If someone says something that bothers you, you have 24 hours to decide either to talk to that person or to make your peace with the comment").

▷ Encourage a culture of **Do-Overs**.[2] Begin by inviting children who struggle with collaboration to participate in a Do-Over—a low-risk way to reset or restart something that went wrong. Do-Overs are applicable to any kind of physical or emotional challenge—unnecessary physicality, hurtful words, miscommunications or misunderstandings, or exclusionary behavior.

▷ Ask students to reflect on experiences of conflict: "What do you think happened?" "What did you learn?" "What would you like to do differently in the future?" Invite students to share their reflections with the group so others can learn from their experience. (You can model working through frustration or conflict by sharing your own experiences, which can give learners language and strategies for coping with strong emotions.)

▷ Make (or ask children to make) and post a menu of children's problem-solving strategies, with visual icons created by the children. Invite children to practice a strategy in the absence of conflict. Post compelling quotes from children about conflict in the classroom.

Tips for Using This Tool

▷ When learners are genuinely engaged in their work and ideas, negotiating ideas and resources with others, learning through play can open the door to strong emotions. Yet conflict and frustration can also be opportunities for learning. Use this tool to support and encourage learners when playful learning gets hard.

▷ For younger learners, if you notice conflict, move closer physically, but still give them a chance to work out the problem before intervening. A quick way to make sure everyone feels heard afterwards is to ask the child(ren) in distress for a signal of two thumbs up, to the side, or down, about how they're feeling.

▷ For older learners, peers can often be more successful than adults in helping students resolve conflict. You might create a "peacekeeper" role and enlist students in negotiating and mediating conflicts for their classmates.

Notes

1. Many of the questions and tips in the "Protocol for addressing conflict during play" come from **Making Friends with Conflict**, a tool created by the Inspiring Agents of Change project at Project Zero. Available at www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/making-friends-with-conflict

2. **Do-Overs** was created by the Inspiring Agents of Change project at Project Zero. Available at: www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/do-over