

How to Handle Children Who Are Disruptive

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Children need encouragement like roses need sunshine.

—Maryln Appelbaum

There are many ways children can disrupt the classroom. They may tattle, complain, blurt out, chatter, get into fights, and insist on having what they want, when they want it. Each type of disruption needs separate strategies and skills. This chapter will give you the skills you need to handle these hard-to-handle children and hard-to-handle situations.

SKILL ONE: HOW TO HANDLE TATTLING

Janette was a brand new preschool teacher. Little Mikey was in her class. He had huge dark eyes, dark curly hair, and a wonderful smile. When he came in each morning, he ran over to Janette and gave her a huge hug. The problem was that he also ran over to her at least once or twice an hour with a tattle about a classmate. Tattling is a very disruptive behavior (Gartrell, 2007). Children who tattle disrupt the routine and the consistency of the classroom. Tattling is detrimental to promoting harmony and cooperation between children.

The origins of tattling are generally in the home. Children learn that when they tattle on a sibling, a friend, or another family member, that person gets in trouble. Children who tattle get sympathy and attention for the tattle. They also learn that when they have problems, adults will step in and solve their problems. They come to preschool and tattle for the

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same reasons. You cannot help what happens in the home, but you can help what happens in the classroom. Tattling can be stopped.

The first step in stopping tattling is to teach children the difference between tattling and reporting. Tattling is to get someone in trouble. Reporting is when a child gets help for someone. Role-play tattling and reporting and have children tell you which one is being used.

- Jason tells you that Todd is hitting Scott in the playground and that Scott is bleeding. Is this an example of reporting or tattling?
This is an example of reporting. Jason appears to be trying to get help for Scott.
- Tonya tells you that Sasha does not want play with her. Is this a report or a tattle?
This is an example of tattling. Tonya appears to be trying to get Sasha into trouble. No one is getting hurt.

Have children give you other examples of reporting and tattling. The more they practice, the better they will get at recognizing the difference between the two.

Strategies for Success for Tattling

Staying Calm

Remain calm when you hear tattles. When children see that you get upset, it actually reinforces the tattling behavior. They think this is a way that they can always get attention and sympathy. The more sympathy they get, the more they will engage in tattling. Take a few deep breaths and stay calm. Remember, the more you react, the more they act!

Tootles Curriculum

Tattling can become contagious. When children see that one child gets attention for tattling, soon they may all start doing it. This may be a sign that children need attention, but in more positive ways. An excellent way to stop tattling in its tracks is to set up a “tootles” curriculum. Tootles are kind statements that children say about others (Skinner, Cashwell, & Skinner, 2000). They are the opposite of tattles. Give children examples of tootles. “Kathy helped Kenny when he dropped his backpack and everything fell out.” “Alfie helped Elma put away the blocks.”

Have a special tootles time each day. It is a good concluding group activity. Children report all the good things others did. Every time you hear a tootle during circle time or during the day, add a paper clip to a tootles glass jar. It needs to be clear glass jar so the children can see the effects of

their tootles as the jar is filled. When the jar is filled with paper clips, the class has a tootles party. Bring in a special treat and encourage them on that day to tell each other lots of tootles so everyone leaves happy.

This is an effective strategy because it teaches children to say nice statements about each other rather than negative ones. The more they get focused on saying positives, the more the negatives fall by the wayside. It creates a different positive climate in the classroom.

Thanks

A simple and effective strategy for handling tattling is to hear the tattle and then calmly say, “Thanks.” Display very little emotion. Children learn from this that tattling gets no real sympathy or attention. They learn to handle their own problems and not get attention from trying to get another child into trouble.

“Sounds Like”

This is an excellent strategy for handling tattling. It acknowledges the emotions children have when they tattle, but does not reinforce the behavior. When you use this technique, you respond to the feeling the child has. You are using empathetic listening without getting actively involved. When Kenny comes to you and says, “Joshie said a bad word,” respond by saying, “Sounds like you’re upset.” Kenny feels acknowledged and heard, yet you did not get involved in resolving the issue.

Tattle Sandwich

A sandwich is composed of two slices of bread with something in the middle. A tattle sandwich is composed of two compliments (the slices of bread), and the tattle in the middle. If children want to tattle, they have to first say something nice about the other child. Then they say the tattle. After saying the tattle, they say something else nice about the other child. This forces them to think in a whole new manner about the children that they are trying to get into trouble. They are now looking for good things to say about these children. Here’s an example: Meagan approached Ms. Janie, her teacher, and said, “Stephanie has on a pretty dress.” This is the first part of the statement—one of the slices of “bread.” Then she said, “She won’t share her toys with me.” That was her tattle. She paused and thought about the other “slice of bread” that had to be nice. She said, “Stephanie gave me one of her crackers yesterday.” The great thing about teaching children to use tattle sandwiches is that it teaches them to focus on the positives about each other, which minimizes tattling.

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Tattle Time

If tattling is a real issue in your classroom, set up a special time each day when children get to tell their tattles. They cannot tell them before that time. By the time tattle time rolls around, they typically have forgotten all about the issue that had them upset in the first place. If they do remember the issue, they have to state it in the form of a tattle sandwich, saying two positives as well as the tattle.

Tattle Bucket

Have a special small bucket called the tattle bucket. Make name cards for each child. Use colored index cards for the name cards. Write each child's name on a separate name card, and then add a unique sticker to each card. The different stickers help children who cannot read their names identify their cards because they recognize their stickers. When children have a tattle, instead of disrupting the class, they get their name card and put it into the tattle bucket. Look in the bucket at varying times during the day. If you see a name card, go to the child and say, "I see you have your name card in the tattle bucket. What would you like to tell me?" Many times, children will have forgotten all about the tattle.

Tattle Ear

There are some children who just like to talk about others. They are not reporting. They are tattling, telling one negative after another. Their goal is to get others in trouble. When children start to tell you tattles like these and are rambling on, have them go tell it to the "ear." Draw an ear and hang the drawing on the wall. Explain that this is the tattle ear, and they are to tell their tattles to the ear. Recently, I went into a preschool and saw one of the children, Maria, walk up to the wall where there was a tattle ear and stand there telling her tattle to the ear. When she finished, she went and rejoined her friends playing in the dramatic play center. She did this all very calmly. It was adorable to watch.

Teach Alternatives to Tattling

Children sometimes do not mean to tattle about someone else. They do it because they are having a problem with another child and just don't know any other way to handle the problem. Teach them other methods to handle the situation. This is not the same as telling them how to handle the situation. When you tell them exactly how to handle situations, they are not learning to think for themselves or to take responsibility for their choices. Teaching them involves explaining different alternatives for the

troublesome situation. For example, Lori approaches her teacher and says, “Cindi is taking too long.” Ms. Jenkins says, “You could say, ‘Cindi, I would like a turn now,’ or you could do something else until Cindi is finished. Which do you prefer?”

SKILL TWO: HOW TO HANDLE COMPLAINING

Complaining is similar to, but different from, tattling. It is similar in that children have formed a pattern of negative statements to get attention. However, it is different because the complaints may not be about other people, but about situations. It is also different because children who frequently complain may develop victim mentalities. This occurs when children feel powerless about many issues. Children can begin to believe that everything bad happens to them. They complain about everything (Parish & Mahoney, 2006). They say, “I can’t,” and actually stop trying to do things. They say they can’t do a drawing. They can’t play in centers. They can’t do a partner activity. They give constant negative excuses. They complain that their classmates do not like them. It’s important to break this negative pattern of behavior. Children need to develop confidence in themselves. They need to learn their strengths and maximize them.

Strategies for Success for Complaining

“I Can’t” to “I Can”

This is a really powerful strategy to teach children to say “I can,” rather than “I can’t.” Begin by asking children all the things they cannot do. Write separate lists for each child. Read their lists aloud to them individually. Now it is time to have an “I can’t” ceremony. Give them their lists and have the children tear them up. Then they toss them into the wastebasket. The goal is to get rid of all the “I can’t’s.”

Next, get a dictionary. Find the word “impossible.” Tell the children that impossible means something that they can’t do. Tell them you are going to scratch out the word “impossible” and then do it.

Tell children stories of people who refused to believe in the word “impossible.” Tell them your own stories of how you didn’t give up when things got rough. Tell them about others. Beethoven was deaf, yet he composed beautiful music. Einstein could not talk until he was 4 years old and had a very difficult time learning in school, but he went on to become famous for his theories. Tell the children what these brilliant individuals have in common is the fact that they never gave up. They never listened to the word “impossible.” They believed, instead, that everything was possible.

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Now the children are ready for the last step, and that is to make lists of all the things they would like to do that they previously thought were impossible. Have them each dictate to you all the things they can do. Put each “I can” on a separate sheet of paper. Have the children color each “I can” and put them all together so they each have their own individual “I can” book. Put the books in the book corner. Label the books with each child’s name and unique sticker.

Connect

One of the most important strategies for all children—those who complain, those who are shy and withdrawn, or those who are disruptive—is to connect (Parish & Mahoney, 2006). Every child needs to feel a sense of belonging. Children do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. When you take time to connect, it totally changes the dynamics of working with even the toughest child. Instead of constant bickering, nagging, and becoming frustrated, you will instead develop a completely new relationship with the children.

One-to-One Meetings This is a great way to connect. It takes some time, but it is so worth it. The truth is that your tough, disruptive children already are taking up precious time in a negative way. This is a positive way to take time that will save time later. Set aside a special time to meet with your toughest child daily for three consecutive weeks. The meeting needs to be for three uninterrupted minutes. Schedule the meeting for a time when you can put your entire focus on the child.

This is not a time for you to do the talking. It is about getting to know the child. Start by explaining that you want this special time together to get to know the child better. Bring up a topic that you think will interest the child. If you are unsure, start with a topic that all children are interested in—a favorite television show, a favorite movie star, or a hobby.

Power Listening When the child begins to talk, use power listening. Power listening is listening in a way so that children want to talk. It is very effective. Sit so that you are both facing each other. It is best to be on the same level. As the child talks, nod your head to indicate that you are listening. Every now and then, say, “Really?” or, “Hmmm.” If the child describes something with lots of emotional impact, say, “Sounds like . . .” plus the emotion. For example, “Sounds like that made you angry.” Your goal is for the child to keep talking. At the end of the time, thank the child and say that you look forward to doing this again.

At first, children will not understand what you are doing. They will wonder why you are doing it; however, after a while, they will grow to like their special time with you. You will build a bond that is enduring.

SKILL THREE: HOW TO HANDLE CONSTANT CHATTER

Our company, the Appelbaum Training Institute, conducted an online survey that listed many disruptive behaviors, including constant chatter. Teachers were asked to choose the most disruptive. The number one disruptive behavior that was chosen was constant chatter! There is a difference between the quiet buzz and fun talking that takes place in the classroom when children are playing or working together on a project and chatter (Bausman, Bent, & Collister, 1999). Chatter occurs when you are trying to give the children directions, and they are not paying attention. It can also get very loud. Chatter in the classroom is disruptive for the entire class. When one child starts talking, it becomes contagious for other children to be talking, and soon the entire classroom is talking. It's important to stop chatter before it reaches this point.

Strategies for Success for Constant Chatter

Taking Charge

Start by taking charge of the classroom. Someone needs to be in charge. If you do not take charge, the children will. Walk confidently. Speak with poise and confidence and believe in yourself and your ability to control the classroom. Children can feel when you are frightened and unsure of yourself. You may have to practice speaking in front of a mirror until your voice is strong, firm, and filled with positive expectations. Do this over and over again. You can also tape record yourself while talking to children. Afterward, as you listen to the tapes, ask yourself, "Would I listen to me? What can I do better?" Practice, practice, and practice some more.

Fun Atmosphere

The more fun you have, the more fun children will have. They will want to pay attention to you because they are excited to see what you will do next. Your enthusiasm is more contagious than a cold. It is infectious. The truth is that any mood you have is contagious, so it is really important that your mood is filled with joy for teaching.

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Silence Game

This is a method first devised by Maria Montessori when she was working with young children in the slums of San Lorenzo, Italy. She used it to teach them the power of silence (Bettmann, 2000). It worked then, and it works now. Here's how to do it. Tell the children that you will be asking them to close their eyes and listen. It will be for less than a minute. When they open their eyes, ask them to name all the sounds they heard.

They generally will hear the air conditioning or heating vent, other children breathing, and noise in the hallway. The next day, do it again for a few seconds longer. Every day, do it longer and longer. It is amazing the sounds they start to hear that they never heard before. This game sets the tone for teaching children the value of silence. Some of them never experience silence. They go home, and their television sets are always on. The television is even on when they go to sleep. They have grown accustomed to noise rather than silence. That is one of the reasons they chatter. With this game, you are teaching them to be still and enjoy the silence. It is a skill that will last their entire lifetimes.

Talking Without Sound

Have a special time each day when children can talk to each other without words. They make gestures, but no words. Children look forward to this special time that is generally held at the end of the day as a fun time. You can use it at other times too, whenever you think the noise level is getting loud.

Silence Sign

Take a brightly colored 8½ by 11 sheet of cardstock and print the word "silence" on it. Show it to the children. Tell them that it says "silence." Explain that silence means to be totally still, to not talk, and to not move. Tell them that every time you hold up the silence sign, they are to get into the "pause position." There are four parts to the pause position:

1. Stop talking
2. Put eyes on teacher
3. Put feet together
4. Fold arms in front of chest

Demonstrate how to do this. Hold up the silence sign and have the class practice getting into the pause position. During regular class time, hold up the silence sign. Some children will not see it, so start speaking quietly and calmly to those who saw the sign as you continue holding the

sign, “I am holding the silence sign, and Jenny sees it and is in the pause position. Now Tomas sees it and is in the pause position.” Name a few more names until all of the children are standing quietly. Thank the children and give them some instructions.

This is an extremely effective strategy for cutting chatter. One day many years ago, I was teaching a group of 4-year-olds when I received a phone call that there was a tornado warning, and the preschool was directly in the predicted path of the tornado. I needed to get the children into the hallway where they would be protected. All of the other rooms had windows, and there were no basements because it was in Houston. I held up the silence sign, and the children immediately got into the pause position. I told them to walk very quietly into the hallway and then quietly sit down. They did. When they were in the hallway, we sang songs until the danger passed. The children had a great time and never even knew there was danger. Children like gimmicks, and the silence sign with the pause position are fun for them to do and a great way to stop chatter.

Chatter Box

Use a music box to keep track of time lost to chatter. When chatter begins, the music starts. When chatter stops, the lid on the music box goes down. At the end of class, play the unused portion of music. This is the time available for free talk. Children learn to save their talk so they can have a longer, more meaningful free talk time. If you cannot find a music box, you can use a song on a CD.

Anchor Activities

When children have nothing to do, they may get bored. To entertain themselves they may engage in inappropriate behavior. Have fun anchor activities for when children finish what they are doing and are waiting to see what will happen next. Anchor activities are activities that fill up time in an appropriate way (Hipsky, 2007). Examples of anchor activities are puzzles, fun reading books, and quiet games. Anchor activities provide a way to keep students busy having fun.

SKILL FOUR: HOW TO HANDLE BLURTING OUT

Blurting out occurs when children loudly say whatever it is they are thinking (Charney, 1998). It also occurs when they raise their hands to get the attention of teachers. They wave their hands frantically in the air as they yell, “Teacher, teacher!”

Strategies for Success for Blurting Out

Two-Hand Rule

The two-hand rule is a great way to solve problems with blurting out. Teach children that whenever they raise their hand, their other hand goes over their mouth. The hand over the mouth is a reminder to keep it closed until called upon. Have children practice using the two-hand rule. Ask them a question and have them raise their hand to answer you. During class time, if children forget to use the two-hand rule, gently but firmly remind them.

Avoiding Reinforcing Negative Behaviors

It's important to monitor your own behavior during blurt-outs. Do you call on children who blurt out? If you do, you are reinforcing the behavior that you wish to end. Every time you call on them when they blurt out, you are saying, "It's OK to blurt out. That's a good way to get attention." Avoid putting your attention on behaviors you do not want to reoccur. Whatever you put your attention on will expand and grow. Place it on negative behaviors, and they will expand and grow. Place it on positive behaviors, and they will expand and grow.

Hand Signals

There are times when children really do need to get your attention, and they need to do it quickly. If they need something that is urgent, have them raise their entire hand in a fist. The fist means that it is an emergency and they need your attention immediately. This is a great way for them to tell you when they need to go to the bathroom.

SKILL FIVE: HOW TO HANDLE TALKING BACK

When children talk back it is not only disruptive, but it is also disrespectful. It sets a tone for other children to become disrespectful. It is something that has to be stopped before it increases.

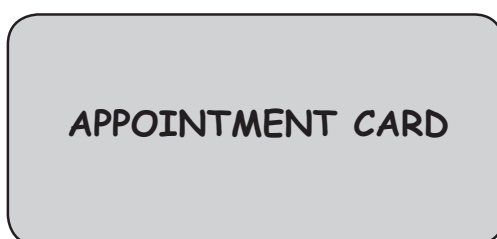
Strategies for Success for Talking Back

Appointment Cards

It is important that you show children you are the one who determines how and when disruptions will be handled, rather than the children.

Explain ahead of time to the entire class that appointment cards are cards that set up meetings with you at a special time during the day. When a child starts talking back or is disruptive, give the child an appointment card and explain that you will be meeting with him or her later: “Here is your appointment card for after circle time.” Resume teaching. By the time of the appointment, the child will be calmer. During the appointment, teach children other ways to ask for what they want in a courteous manner. Have them role-play asking for what they want.

Figure 1.1 Appointment Card



Use Power Talk

There are special ways to talk to children so they listen the first time. Use power talk. There are several components to power talk.

Words—“I Need” Statements The words you use are very important. “I need” statements demonstrate respect for children, yet are assertive. Here’s an example of an “I need” statement:

“Graham, (pause) I need you, (pause) to stop, (pause) now.”

The first word is always the child’s name followed by a pause. Then say, “I need you,” and pause again. Now say what it is you want the child to do. If it is urgent, add the word “now.” The pauses are very important. As you pause, the child hears the emphasis in your voice of what needs to be done.

Squat Squat down as you speak so that you are on the same level with the child, about two to three feet apart. It is important to not be too close or it may seem threatening to the child.

You also don’t want to be too far away. It’s important to never speak across the room. When you speak across the room, children learn from observing to do the same thing, and soon they start speaking across the room, raising their voices to other children.

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Voice Tone Use a low, deep voice. Often teachers have their voices get louder and louder as they speak. Make sure to have your voice get lower and lower. The lower you speak, the more emphasis there is in your voice.

Speak With Confidence The more you believe that children will listen to you when you speak, the more they will listen. They can tell when you are confident and they can tell when you are not. Practice, practice, and practice some more. This is an extremely effective technique, but it only works with lots of practice.

SKILL SIX: HOW TO HANDLE POWER STRUGGLES

Power struggles are exhausting. A power struggle occurs when children want their way, and they hold out until they get what they want. It's a learned behavior. Children learn that if they hold out long enough, they can always get what they want. They generally do this not only in interactions with teachers, but also with their families. Family members typically describe these children as being strong willed. They are strong in determination. This is an asset. It's important to not squelch their strength, but to teach them to be respectful of others.

Power struggles occur when children want what they want, when they want it, and the teacher wants them to do something else (Ferko, 2005). I can still remember at the beginning of my teaching career when this happened to me. I engaged in all the typical behaviors that did not work. I ignored the child and hoped the problem would go away. Sometimes, I yelled. Other times, I argued with children, and they argued back. Eventually one of us had to give in, and I'm embarrassed to say often I was that person. I would just become so worn out that I gave in. As soon as I did this, of course, the child learned, "If I hold out long enough, I can always get what I want." The power struggles continued and continued with each one taking longer and longer to resolve (see Figure 1.2).

Strategies for Success for Power Struggles

Appelbaum Rule of Three

It took a while, but I finally understood that I could not give in. I also realized what I now call the "Appelbaum Rule of Three." Every time you give in, you ensure that the child will engage in another power struggle at least three more times. That is because the child has won and has learned to hold out longer than you. The child will be convinced that this time will be no exception and will continue to struggle with you.

Figure 1.2 Power Struggles Cycle

Power Struggles Cycle	
Child's Behavior	Engages in inappropriate behavior Makes inappropriate request
Teacher's Reaction	Ignores Argues Yells
Child's Behavior	Additional inappropriate request or behavior
Teacher's Reaction	Ignores Argues Yells
Child's Behavior	Additional inappropriate request or behavior
Teacher's Reaction	Gives in
Child's Reaction	"I won." "This works."

There are really no winners when this happens. Children may think they have won, but they have really lost. They have lost because they think they have learned something about the real world. In the real world, they cannot always have what they want, when they want it. That is not how it works.

One day, many years ago, I was on an airplane flying to give a seminar. I got into a conversation with a flight attendant. She was a very attractive, perky, 23-year-old woman. She asked me what I was doing because I had my notes out in front of me to prepare for the seminar. I told her that I was going to give a seminar on behavior management of children. She said, "Please tell my story." She then proceeded to tell me about her life. She said that as a child, she got everything she wanted, when she wanted it. She said she would cry and have tantrums if she didn't get what she wanted. Her parents always gave in. She said that she started to have problems in her relationships in elementary school. She expected other students to also give her what she wanted. When they did not, she became angry and friendships ended. She said that she had recently been engaged to a man she loved very much. She said she followed the same pattern with him, and he broke the engagement. To top it all off, she said that her

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parents had cancelled her credit cards this past year. They wanted her to make it on her own. She said she had no idea how to do that. She had taken this job, but she did not know if she would be able to keep it because her behaviors were so deeply entrenched. She ended her story by pleading with me, “Tell them my story. Tell them so they know not to do this with children.”

I do not know what happened to this young woman. One can only hope that she somehow made her life more successful. Her story is an inspiration to not give in to children all the time, to help them learn to be respectful, and to teach them skills that will last their entire lives.

Two Positive Choices

Typically, when there is a power struggle, teachers do offer choices. However, the choice is between a positive choice and a negative choice. It becomes a threat. “Do this or _____ will happen.” This serves to make children rebel even more and hold out longer. When you offer two positive choices, children generally forget about their struggle and choose one of the two. “You can go to the reading center now or you can work at the art easel. Which do you prefer?”

Children still feel powerful. They are still in control of what they do; however, it is now between the limits you have provided.

Delaying

When children are extremely emotional about something, it is often wise to use the delaying tactic. This gives both of you time to cool down and think more rationally. Say, “I can see you are really upset. I am too. I need to talk about this later. We can do it after circle time this morning or after lunch. Which do you prefer?”

Children still feel empowered because, once again, they have been asked to make a choice. However, once again, you are in charge as you delay the conversation. It’s important to remember that children really need someone to be in charge. Yes, they want freedom, but they are happiest when it is within limits. This gives them the structure they so badly need. Too much freedom can result in chaos for them. It is like going to a department store that has a sale. You walk in and see tables all over saying “50–80 percent off today.” There are people pulling and poking all the products on the tables in their struggle to find bargains. It is chaos. Even as you reach in to look for your own bargain, you know that you would prefer to find the bargain another way—a way that had structure rather than chaos.

Changing the Frame

When children engage in a power struggle, they get stuck continuing the struggle until they get what they want. Sometimes, by the time they get what they want, they do not really even care about what it was. Instead, it is about winning. Change this mental frame by distracting the child. Say something that is completely and totally different from what you both are talking about. For example, one day 4-year-old Brandon was trying to get his teacher, Mrs. Carlton, in a power struggle. Mrs. Carlton suddenly turned to Brandon and said, “Oh my gosh! I think I left my garage door open this morning. I can’t believe that it may be open. I wonder how I can get the garage door shut. My husband is at work, and I’m here. Oh my gosh!” Brandon stopped in his tracks and looked at Mrs. Carlton with a look that said, “Are you kidding?” She went on talking about her garage door, and Brandon walked away, forgetting all about the power struggle.

Mrs. Engle had her own way of handling power struggles. Mrs. Engle loved to sing. She would break out in a song in the middle of teaching. Her children loved her. She would make up words to songs to tie into teaching any concept. She did not plan the words ahead. She just got up there and taught and sang. She had complete command of the class’s attention. She was fun and entertaining as she taught. Raul was one of her students and was very strong willed. He got into trouble and had power struggles with all other adults, but he never got into trouble in Mrs. Engle’s class. When asked about how she handled Raul, she said, “I sing. Whenever he begins to become argumentative, I either get the whole class singing a fun song, or I just look at him and start singing something.” Mrs. Engle burst into song, “Not right now, Raul, not right now. Later, later, later. You can sing with me, Raul, later, later, later.” Raul always joined her in song, and they smiled and laughed, and the power struggle never happened. She had changed the frame with a song.

SKILL SEVEN: HOW TO HANDLE CHILDREN’S CONFLICTS

Conflict in early childhood, as in adulthood, is inevitable. Conflict occurs when two or more people have different views on a similar topic, and they not only disagree but also try to convince the other person that their views are the correct ones. They confront each other often in unpleasant ways (Turnuklu, 2007). Instead, they need to learn to “carefront.” “Carefrontation” occurs when two or more people still disagree, but discuss their disagreement in a caring way with each other.

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Conflict occurs in young children for various reasons. Sometimes it occurs because children lack social and communication interaction skills. One child may be struggling to say something, and it comes across to the other child as hostile or threatening. As soon as this occurs, the second child then retaliates by becoming hostile and even more threatening. Before you know it, a huge fight has sprouted from a really insignificant occurrence that became magnified.

Another reason that conflict may occur is when a child enters the classroom with displaced anger. Ethan was one of those children. He came into his preschool classroom one morning with a chip on his shoulder. What no one knew is that the night before, his dad had left his mom. His mom had told Ethan that it was his fault. She said, “If only you had been better, he would not have left.” Ethan felt like he was a bad child. He came into his preschool the next day angry and hostile. When he and Gregie were working together in the block area, Ethan started picking on Gregie. Nothing Gregie could do was right. Gregie was a patient and quiet child, but Ethan kept picking on him. Gregie got angrier and angrier, and soon he said some things back to Ethan. The conflict was on.

If Ethan had been able to come into preschool and talk about his feelings, this could have been prevented. Instead, he came into school angry and hostile. His feelings escalated as the day went on, as he kept thinking about what had occurred the night before.

Strategies for Success for Children’s Conflicts

When children and adults get angry, they confront each other and often say unpleasant things that they may later regret. They may become aggressive and even combative. Instead of confronting each other, it is better to “carefront” each other. In a “carefrontation” there is still a lack of agreement about a situation; however, the skills that are used to resolve the situation are caring skills.

Conflict resolution in general is not something that comes naturally. It is a skill that needs to be developed. Children need to learn this skill, which will help them throughout their entire lives. It will also help make your classroom a better place, a safer place, and a place where children treat each other with respect. Take lots of time to teach this skill. Start teaching it at the beginning of the school year and take time to periodically review it.

“I Need” Statements

Typically when young children are mad at each other, they make lots of “you” statements. They say “You did . . . and you did. . . .” “You” statements

are accusatory and are almost guaranteed to cause the other child to become upset and hostile. This promotes confrontation rather than carefrontation.

Teach children to use “I need” statements (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). Instead of accusing another child of an inappropriate behavior, they say, “I need,” and ask for what they want. Then they always say, “Is that OK with you?” If the other child says, “No,” the first child says, “OK,” and goes on to do something else. This is a strategy that has to be rehearsed with the children. Earlier I talked about using “power talk.” Children will copy you. That is one of the best ways to teach “I need” statements. You are always a role model. They are watching you at all times and learning.

Peace Table

Set up a small table with three seats in the classroom. One seat will be for you, and the other two seats will be for children who are fighting. When children are in conflict, have them go to the peace table to use carefrontation—to talk about it. You will be the mediator. It’s important to start not with the accusations of each child, but instead with the end goals. Have a “Peace Wand.” This is a small wand you can make using construction paper. Children cannot talk unless they are holding the wand. Have the children take turns holding the wand and asking for what they need. “I need Cody to share the toys.” “I need Ethan to say nice things to me.” After the children share what they want, have them say one nice thing they like about each other and then shake hands or hug.

I was observing at an early childhood program, making video clips to use in seminars, when two 4-year-old girls got into a fight. I immediately took advantage of the situation so I could videotape it for audiences to see. The school did not have a peace table, so I quickly made one and improvised a wand. I had the children sit opposite each other and say what they needed. It was adorable. They were two little girls and the fighting had become intense before sitting at the peace table. When I asked the children to tell each other something nice they liked about each other, they were each at a loss at first. It was a new concept for them. The first child, Samantha, looked at Emmy, the other little girl, and finally responded, “Pizza.” I had no idea what she meant. I said, “Pizza?” with a question mark in my voice. Samantha said, “Emmy loves pizza. I do too. I like that.” When it was Emmy’s turn, she said, “Candy.” Children say the cutest things, and you just never know what they will say. The point is that the children did list something they liked about each other and afterward gave each other big hugs. The conflict was resolved using carefrontation.

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Peace Chain

Begin with a box of oval links cut from construction paper. Encourage your class to catch each other in acts of peacemaking. These include children choosing not to fight and children helping others who are upset to feel better. Each time an act of peace is reported, a link describing the act is added to a chain that starts at the ceiling. When the chain touches the floor, hold a celebration.

Role-Plays

Children need to be taught appropriate skills for communication. Do this through role-play. Use puppets to demonstrate social skills, including how to accept “no” for an answer. Have children get into dyads. One partner makes a request. The other partner responds, “No.” The first child says, “OK.” Have them take turns practicing, repeatedly making new requests, then hearing “no” and responding “OK.”

Have them practice both giving and receiving compliments. There are children who have never said a nice word to another child. In fact, they may not have ever said a nice word to another person at home either. Make sure they understand that it has to be sincere. If it is insincere, it feels worse than if nothing was said.

Teach them how to receive compliments. There are children who are more comfortable giving them than receiving them. These children may not feel worthy, or it may just be so foreign to them that they feel strange. Teach them to respond, “Thank you.” Have them take turns giving and receiving compliments and responding, “Thank you.”