

Understanding and Dealing with Conflict

Even young children are aware of the events happening in the present unsettling world climate. They are bombarded with images of war, crime and violence daily as they watch television, films and videos. Students may have difficulty expressing their fears and concerns, and dealing with conflict in their daily life.

It is the responsibility of every classroom teacher to:

- provide a peaceful, happy classroom situation where students are aware of their rights and responsibilities,
- allow opportunities for communication skills to develop,
- encourage correct social behaviour skills,
- reinforce cooperation and team-building skills,
- act as role model, negotiator and mediator to resolve conflicts.

The following suggestions provide the basis for dealing with conflict within the classroom and school environment.

Provide a Happy, Peaceful Classroom

- Reward students for all attempts to complete work and to behave suitably.
- Try to always say something positive. (It is the inappropriate ACTION, not the child, that is to be changed.)
- Display all student work (yes – even the ‘yukky’ ones!) to make the room as colourful and cheerful as possible.
- Make sure all rules and responsibilities are clearly stated and understood. (Students should help to make the class rules at the beginning of the year. This gives them a feeling of ownership.)
- Demonstrate a positive, cheerful attitude and the students will respond in the same manner.

Try these activities to promote this strategy:

Secret Friends

Students write their names on a piece of paper and place it into a container. Each child selects one name (not his/her own) and writes/tells five nice things about that student.

Greetings/Praise

Each day, students say good morning and smile at one different person. They may also say one nice thing to someone whom they wouldn't normally speak to.

Joke of the Week

Choose a particular time (Friday afternoons are good!) to allow a short time for a given number of students to present a joke or short story. After all the jokes/stories have been told, the class votes for the best joke or story. The winner of the ‘Joke of the Week’ competition wears the ‘Joker of the Week’ badge.

Develop Communication Skills

- Encourage ‘active’ listening; i.e. make sure that students are actually hearing what is being said when, for example, following directions. Games such as ‘Chinese Whispers’ emphasise this skill.
- Encourage students to talk about their feelings and give their point of view.
- Encourage assertive, not passive or aggressive, behaviour.
- Develop the students’ awareness of body language and facial features as a means of reading the feelings of others.
- Provide strategies for coping with anger management; for example, walk away, count to 10, take some deep breaths, move away from the situation.

Try these activities to promote this strategy:

News/Show and Tell Circles

As a change from the whole class listening to each person’s news/show and tell, divide the students into small groups. Students go around the circle telling their news. When all have given their news, the students return to the class group and a student retells the news of another student in his/her own words. This reinforces attentive listening as well as concise ‘telling’.

Anger Ball Toss

Find a soft ball and ask the students to form a circle. The teacher begins by saying, ‘I feel angry when ...’ and tosses the ball to one of the students. The student repeats the statement and completes it. He/She then tosses the ball to another student, who repeats the statement and completes the sentence in his/her own words, and so on. .

Encourage Correct Social Behavioural Skills

- Model correct behaviours as much as possible; for example, say 'Please', 'Thank you', 'Excuse me'.
- Ensure that all rules of acceptable classroom and school behaviour are understood, as well as the consequences of failing to follow the rules.
- Clearly state the procedures for correct behaviour; for example, students are listening if:
 - they are looking at the speaker;
 - they are sitting still; and
 - they are thinking about what the speaker is saying.
- Reward correct behaviour with a positive statement, a smile, a sticker or by bringing the student's behaviour to the attention of other students as a role model.

Try these activities to promote this strategy:

'The Talking Stick Game'

Students sit in groups of five or six. One person has the talking stick. Only the student with the stick is allowed to speak. When the student has finished speaking, he/she passes the stick to the next student, who is then allowed to speak.

'Honour' Student of the Week

Each week, select one student who performed an act of kindness, acted responsibly or displayed correct social behaviours. Reward the student with an honour card, extra free time, additional time on the computer etc. Endeavour to choose every child in the class, throughout the year. Try to 'catch' children being good. This ensures that teachers are looking for the best behaviour from students; not always seeing the bad. Teachers may wish to select a particular virtue or social skill each week for the students to practise.

Reinforce Cooperation and Team-building Skills

- Demonstrate tolerance of differences and similarities.
- Encourage group and partner work.
- Encourage students to be responsible within the classroom, by giving them small jobs to do on a rotational basis.
- Give all students the opportunity to be line-leaders or team-leaders in different activities.
- Award points or rewards for tables of students who clean up or finish work quickly.
- Encourage and demonstrate the importance of taking the time to listen to one another.
- Encourage students to assist each other at times when they are not being assessed individually; for example, when they need the correct spelling of a word for their daily writing.

Try these activities to promote this strategy:

'Avoid the Obstacles'

Students pair up and one is blindfolded. The other student leads the 'blindfolded' student on a short walk, making sure to avoid all the obstacles. The student who is blindfolded has to trust the other student to lead them safely wherever they have to go.

Similarities and Differences

Students form groups of five as quickly as possible within a given time with others who have the same or different characteristics; for example, the teacher may call out 'Children who have brown shoes on' or 'Children who have their birthday in June' etc. Students then form small groups with other students who have the same feature.

Act as Negotiator and Mediator to Resolve Conflicts

- Model correct procedures when solving conflicts; for example:
 - Listen to both sides of the conflict, allowing both parties to express how they feel, what has happened and how they would like to resolve the conflict.
 - Negotiate a suitable solution so that both parties are satisfied. (Compromise may be needed.)
 - Find the best solution.
 - Both parties agree to accept the solution.
 - Shake hands.
- Reinforce the same words or procedure each time until students are very familiar with it.
- Encourage other students to suggest creative solutions to solve conflicts.

Try these activities to promote this strategy:

Keeping Secrets

One student is told a secret message by the teacher and expected to keep that secret until the end of a given time; for example, from the beginning of school until morning recess. Other students may try to trick the student into revealing the secret message. The student reveals the secret message to the class at the end of the given time.

- A mediator is a teacher/mature student who:

- respects himself and others,
- is a good listener,
- has empathy,
- likes to help others,
- is willing to give up his/her free time,
- keeps things in confidence,
- doesn't take sides.

Perhaps, by providing strategies for helping students to resolve conflict using non-violent, assertive procedures, we may be contributing to a more peaceful situation in our immediate environments.