**Creating A Calm, Conflict-Free Playground**

**What is Conflict Resolution?**

Conflict resolution is the process of trying to resolve a dispute or a conflict. Successful conflict resolution comes about by listening to everyone involved and by providing opportunities to meet the needs of each group. The interests of each group need to be addressed so that each is satisfied with the resolution’s outcome.

**What is an Ideal Outcome?**

The ideal outcome after conflict resolution is that the needs of each group has been addressed and satisfied, and there is a win-win situation for everyone. A win-lose outcome is less than ideal. The best way forward is to work towards the positive outcomes and to minimise negative ones.

**Why Do We Need Conflict Resolution?**

In the classroom, children often have clear classroom rules and structured activities. Their time is usually well-organised and they are often sitting at a particular table. Teachers can choose who the children sit next to and can manage activities carefully.

In other parts of the school like halls, corridors and playgrounds, children have a lot more freedom. Some of them haven’t yet absorbed the school’s Golden Rules, some of them aren’t very good at sharing the spaces or resources. Some may be bored or having a bad day, they may be feeling left out, unhappy, hyper-excitable or just want to disrupt other children who are happily playing a game. Some common reasons may be:

* Children not taking turns with equipment properly
* Children feeling left out of a game
* Children arguing about the rules of a game
* Children not agreeing on what the outcome of a game was – like who won
* Children trying to be friends with another child who is not interested
* Children wanting their friend to play a different game or go to a different place
* Children being bored and disrupting other people for the sake of it

Post-Covid research has highlighted that children’s social and emotional competencies have gone ‘backwards’ and children are operating at much younger emotional ages.

**Reducing the Need for Conflict Resolution**

As some conflicts may be avoidable when reasonable preventative steps are taken, here are some ideas to lessen the need for conflict resolution.

1. **Make Clear your Rules, Consequences and Incentives**

Rules need to be very visible, known and understood by everyone. The rules may change throughout the school – for instance in the playground, children need to know the Playground Golden Rules. These can be embedded through discussions, posters, stories, assemblies and circle times so that everyone is playing and working within the same set of guidelines. The Golden Rules become your moral values and can be referred to in conversations. For example, “Children when you play football in the playground today, please remember the rule ‘We are gentle when we play’”. The rules need to be linked to incentives and sanctions and different rules may be applicable in different parts of the school – like in the dining hall, in classrooms.

1. **Think Circle Time and Social and Emotional Competencies**

Remembering the five broad social and emotional aspects of learning can be really useful: Self-awareness, Managing Feelings, Motivation, Empathy, Social Skills. Conflict resolution aiming to ensure that everyone feels positive about the outcomes of any upset is one of the Social Skills.

Circle Time is great for focusing upon these competencies and for boosting social skills, teamwork and empathy. It is also a great way to get children talking to each other, to discuss ideas like playground games, friendships, sharing, turn-taking, playground rules and teamwork. They can do activities around these and practice too while playing games in a circle. Once these skills are learnt, they can take them outside and be reminded of what they have learnt. “Remember the other day, we all practiced turn taking in Circle Time? Today I would like you to practice this when you are using the skipping ropes at playtime.”

1. **Encourage Children to Practice Conflict Resolution Skills for Themselves**

There are lots of ways that children can become skilled at preventing conflicts all by themselves. Practice is one of the keys. Ideas can be discussed and practiced during class circle times. Teachers can also provide the following to help this happen:

* Weekly circle times with speaking rounds and “Would it help if……?”;
* An area in the classroom can be set aside where children can go to resolve conflicts, different areas can be marked on the floor or mat to show where the different parties should stand;
* A timer (give the children, say, 5 minutes to try to resolve their conflicts without adult support);
* A poster in the classroom can give tips and a way forward for peaceful conflict resolution;
* Certificates to congratulate them when they do peacefully resolve a conflict;
* Some symbolic items can be ready to hand for them to offer each other such as small pictures or models;
* Records to be kept in a class book about solving conflicts so that children can reflect upon what has happened and can write or draw about it for others to see;
* A personal journal about their own conflicts and how these were either resolved or inflamed.

**Some Ideas for the Reduction of Conflict Specifically in Playgrounds**

1. **Introduce Playground Friends**

Some children are at a very loose end at playtime and having a Playground Friends’ Stop plus designated children who can befriend and re-engage children in playground games is a valuable addition to the atmosphere in the playground. Playground Friends now have a clear role – based on friendship. Their job is to spot lonely children and engage them in games. So they may well team up with one or two children and go with them into the zone of the children’s choice. Their specific focus is on the Friendship Stop as they have to quickly rescue any child standing there. They can also be trained in conflict resolution and peer mediation. They are also friends of Midday Supervisors! They meet up regularly with them to see what extra help they might need e.g. door, corridor, toilet or litter duties are just a few of the things that have been requested by Midday Supervisors.

1. **Zone the Playground**

Some playground conflicts arise through the same spaces being used for different activities. Having clearly-defined zones can help to let different groups do different types of activities without getting in each other’s way. Our Playground Zone signs can help to clearly lay out the zones.

1. **Appoint Zone Managers**

Some children like to volunteer to take on a role at lunchtime. Introducing Zone Managers helps your zones to run smoothly. Zone Managers apply for the zone they most want to manage; are interviewed and get the job on the basis of the ideas and games they suggest they will implement in the zone.  Zone Managers help other children learn games relevant to that zone and also have the job of bringing in and putting away equipment.

**What To Do When You Think A Conflict May Be Brewing**

Frequently there is an opportunity for staff to prevent conflicts from happening just before they happen. Some of this is about being in the right place at the right time, but also it is about being observant and looking for clues. There are often clues in children’s behaviour and patterns of activity. When it is clear that a conflict might be about to happen, these things can be tried:

1. **Ignore**

Tactically ignoring some behaviours can allow something more constructive to happen. So, occasionally ignoring it when someone does something wrong buys you time to change the direction of their activities. For instance, if a child is getting frustrated and throws a piece of equipment down angrily, it might be best to pretend not to see that, but to notice something fascinating that they can come and look at or ask if they could join up with another team to play a game, or ask for help in doing a job.

1. **Distract**

Sometimes it is enough to distract children. If two children aren’t getting the hang of something, they could be asked to watch how two other children are playing rather than getting frustrated with each other. If an activity isn’t going too well, you can alter the activity or suggest three teams would be better than two, or just spot the geese flying over the school and let’s run around in a line like geese! If you can suggest something that is more fun than what is happening, they will probably want to be distracted.

1. **Engage**

Some children are not good at finding a new activity to do, they are not good at just kicking their heels and need something to do. Engaging them in something constructive – either part of their learning or helping an adult – can keep them away from other children who they might get into conflict with. Timed or numbered tasks can be good:

* Let’s see how quickly you can collect up all the books
* When you’ve collected all the pictures in, I would love to know which one you like best
* I wonder how many tennis balls you can carry at once back to the bag.

**Adult-Led Conflict Resolution**

Some pupil conflicts will definitely need adult intervention to manage the situation. The following is one way ahead, after making sure everybody is safe:

* Explain to the children that you are all working towards a win-win situation;
* First, make sure that you, yourself, feel calm. If not, try to calm yourself down;
* Ask the different parties to talk through their issues in turn and encourage everyone to listen without interruption;
* Repeat back to different parties what you heard them say happened, how and why;
* Ask them for their ideas of what they would like to see as an outcome;
* Help them choose an option that you all find most acceptable.
* We all need individuals to feel heard and eventually walk away feeling the outcomes were fair.

**How Adults and Children can Make Conflicts Better …. or Worse**

Some things would make conflicts much worse, below is a list of actions to avoid.

* shouting
* accusing
* assuming that the person has deliberately set out to be horrible
* saying “you always ...” or “you never ...”
* angry body language and gestures
* getting too close either party
* interrupting
* not listening
* talking over the other person
* demanding

**What You Can Do to Make Conflicts Better**

Children can be asked to think through what could help to reduce a conflicting situation. Some ideas that they might come up with are given below:

* listening to each other
* leaving some time and coming back to the conversation later
* trying to understand the situation from the other person’s point of view
* using a calm voice
* using calm and non-angry body language
* using respectful language
* saying calmly how you feel and why you feel like that
* saying what you would like to happen
* not standing too close to each other
* finding some common ground – saying “I know we would both like to sort this out”
* admitting the things you did that were wrong
* saying sorry
* offering to make amends

Well run Circle Times reduce conflict by helping children create positive relationships. Children take their issues to the circle which are then resolved by the whole group together. They learn to listen and to be kind. The learn games, turn taking and enjoying each others company.

# To Sum Up: Six Steps to Resolving Conflicts

# Ask the individuals concerned to calm down and to take some deep breaths. Breathe in 1…2…3, breathe out 1…2…3. If a child is ‘beyond’ being calm then have an area he can go to.

# Ask each child to tell you calmly what the problem is or what happened. Remind them to keep breathing calmly.

# Repeat back to them what you heard them say. “So you did this and then you heard him say ……..”

# Ask the children how they would like to solve the problem. Ask if it would help to use the sentences: “Would it help if I …. Or would it help if we ……?” “What suggestions do you have?”

# Repeat back to the children what they have suggested.

# “So you suggest we should …and you suggest that you should …”

# Tell the children that their ideas are great and ask what one thing they would now like to say to each other.

 **The best way of reducing conflict is to give more attention to what is going well rather than engaging in problems; children love attention.**

**If you model deep, respectful listening and thoughtful responses to their problems they will give you more!!**

**Show the same attention to what you notice is going very well i.e. children playing together, inviting friends into their games, using their imagination, keeping to the rules, waiting patiently, lining up calmly. Never take good behaviour for granted!**

**Keeping children busy is the best solution. Has your playground enough activities for all your different personalities and characters e.g. Nature, Make-believe, Singing and Dancing, Craze of the Week, Traditional Games and Skipping Zones.**

**We can’t stress enough how important it is not to stand with other adults - the children need you to be noticing and engaging with all the positive aspects of being in the playgound.**