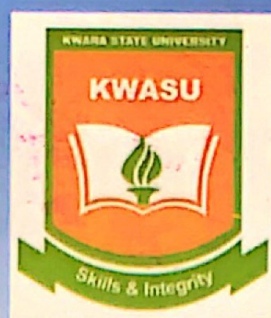


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FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITOR-IN CHIEF

It is my pleasure to present to you the Maiden Edition of Journal of Early Childhood and Primary Education. (JECPE). This Journal provides qualitative and quantitative research in early childhood and primary education, bridging cross-disciplinary areas, and applying theory and research within the professional community. This reflects the world-wide growth in theoretical and empirical research on learning and development in early childhood and primary education. The journal publishes peer-reviewed articles covering curriculum, child care programmes, administration, staff development, family-school relationships, equity issues, child development, advocacy and more. The journal has particular relevance to policymakers and practitioners working in fields related to early childhood.

I hereby present to you all the articles in this our maiden edition in affirming our claim for professionalization of early childhood education in KWASU, Nigeria. I hope you enjoy reading them and that they challenge you to think about the issues raised. I also hope that many of you will work to share your research over the coming months and years ahead. It is so important that your experience and voice are heard in this academic arena as we work together to increase the profile of early childhood education. I wish you all the best and I look forward to another challenging year in 2013. "Onward Early Childhood Educators/Practitioners"

Professor Olaiya E. Aina

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INSTRUCTION TO CONTRIBUTORS

Journal of Early Childhood and Primary Education publishes articles in the areas of Early Childhood and Primary Education and other relevant fields. It is a professional publication for early childhood practitioners such as classroom teachers, child care providers, and teacher educators.

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3. Manuscripts should be formatted as a MS Word document using 12 point New Times Roman font, double-spaced with 1 1/2 inch margins all around and should not exceed 15 pages in length including the reference list. Authors should ensure originality of content and avoid cut and paste materials.
4. The author's name, contact information, and institutional affiliation should appear on the title page only.
5. An abstract of 250 words or less should follow the title page. Reference should conform to the Publication Manual (latest edition) of the American Psychological Association.
6. All manuscripts will be acknowledged promptly. All articles will undergo rigorous peer review, based on initial editor screening and refereeing by anonymous reviewers. The review process takes three months.
7. Articles judged to be of substantial importance to those concerned with the education of children and of the highest quality and ethical standards will be accepted.
8. Submit your final article (if required) before the deadline mentioned in the acceptance letter.

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EXPLORING STRATEGIES ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways educators can teach problem-solving skills in early childhood settings by helping the children implement effective conflict resolution strategies when conflicts arise. Little attention has been given to conflict resolution in preschools. This paper explores the types of conflict resolution strategies used and thought were effective in early childhood classrooms. This paper provides schools and parents with information, suggestions, and activities that can increase awareness of the nature of conflicts, conflict-resolution strategies, and management of conflict and crisis situations. It focuses on developing a positive school climate that enhances intergroup relationships, encourages proactive recognition of potential problems, and provides suggestions for management of conflicts among children.

Introduction

Conflicts are born out of caring. People do not fight about issues they don't care about.... Conflict is a force that potentially unleashes people's imagination. Inherently, conflict is neither good nor bad; rather the outcomes of conflict can be good or bad, functional or harmful, positive or negative.... Conflict is a process to be managed, not eliminated. W. Allen Randolph

Conflict is variously defined as a direct disagreement of ideas or interests, a battle or struggle, antagonism or opposition, and incompatibility and interference. Our interest was to analyze different areas of conflict resolution in early childhood classroom settings. We would like to explore all

aspects of conflict resolution between young children and their parents, siblings, and peers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), there are now approximately five million children enrolled in childcare centres. As a result of this, child care providers are essential in raising children and affecting their socio-emotional development. A significant part of their social and emotional development is interacting with others in situations of conflict. Conflict is unavoidable and occurs between individuals and small and large groups throughout each day, every day. Teachers of young children encounter conflict between children, between children and families, and between themselves and their students every day. By engaging in positive conflict resolution practices, the teacher is able to facilitate positive conflict resolution in the classroom. This paper focused on answering these questions: Did early childhood educators desire additional conflict resolution strategies? What type of conflict resolution strategies did these educators think work? What type of conflict resolution strategies did teachers use in their centres?

Elements of Conflict

Conflict resolution is not problem solving. Conflict resolution is the process of attempting to resolve a dispute or disagreement between two or more people. Problem solving is the processing of finding an answer or solution to a question or task. Mayer (1995) identified two elements of conflict: (1) the objective differences between the participants and (2) the emotions and perceptions attendant to the conflict. It is essential that both aspects of conflict be recognized and addressed, because. Grafting a solution to the dispute without allowing for some degree of emotional release will not ultimately resolve the conflict. Similarly, attending exclusively to feelings of aggravation, hurt, and anger without moving to a satisfactory outcome is an ineffective resolution. Related to this, Umbreit (1995) noted that communication breakdowns often create or contribute to conflictual situations. Misinterpreting one's message and meaning, failing to actively listen to both the content and feeling elements of a message, and not devoting full attention to the speaker can all affect the escalation of a conflict or the inability to address it.

Emerging from the conflicts themselves are the interests of the participants that must be satisfied if the disagreement is to be successfully resolved. Interests may be instrumental or intrinsic in nature. Instrumental interests focus on the longer-term consequences of the current areas of dispute. For example, these interests may be concerned with setting precedents or affecting future relationships. Intrinsic interests, on the other hand, are focused on the advantages or disadvantages of a proposal in and of itself.

Principles and Practices of Conflict Resolution

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) offered a matrix that illustrated five distinct responses to conflict as they vary along the axes of assertiveness (pursuit of individual needs) and cooperativeness (focus on the needs of the other). The resulting five styles include (1) avoiding ("I leave and you win"), (2) accommodating ("I let you win"), (3) compromising ("We both win some and lose some"), (4) competing ("I win and you lose"), and (5) collaborating ("We both win"). Umbreit (1995) noted that each style has advantages and disadvantages, and each has its appropriate use, depending on the nature of the conflict. Typically, individuals adopt one style over the others as their dominant approach, although collaboration is the ideal outcome if the willingness and resources exist to pursue

it. The advantage in the collaborative approach is that it is the one most likely to preserve the relationship between the parties as well as achieve an acceptable substantive outcome.

Exploring what research studies say about resolving conflicts in early childhood classroom settings

Over the years, there have been a few research studies that examined the issues of conflict resolution among young children. There are several misconceptions about conflict. Chen (2001) stated that conflict often has a negative connotation associated with the word. Sometimes it implies tension and negative emotion or confrontation. This common misconception can be detrimental to the learning experiences of young children. Children will inevitably experience conflict and therefore it would be best to learn to work it out in a manner that benefits both parties. Conflict can be destructive or constructive. Participants in conflict can choose to resolve it by acting aggressively or cooperatively or through accommodation (Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, and Petrakos, 2002). According to research, children use several methods for resolving conflict (Chen, 2003). These strategies include telling the teacher, withdrawing, simply saying no, reasoning with others involved, evading, making threats, and describing social norms such as taking turns. Children tend to use a variety of tactics in dealing with situations of conflict. Conflict can be a positive experience that can help children in future interactions with others. In this study, it is important to note the role of the teacher as a model in situations of conflict. According to social learning theory, children look to their teachers for cues in how to act during times of conflict. Teachers can have attitudes that promote the idea that the needs of the self and the other can be balanced. When interacting with other adults in the classroom, teachers can use approaches that benefit solely themselves or the other, or they can find a compromise that benefits both parties involved.

Social Sensitivity in conflict

Rourke, Wozniak, and Cassidy (1999) studied the social sensitivity of preschoolers in conflict. They looked at three resolution strategies: negotiation (explanations, justifications, reasoning), power assertion (insisting, negating, grabbing, physical and verbal aggression), and disengagement (ignoring, changing topic/activity, diverting attention) (as cited in Rourke et. al, p. 212). Adult intervention was also a possible resolution approach.

This study consisted of 56 preschool students either attending a preschool lab at a university or a nearby day care center (Rourke et. al, 1999, p. 213). They ranged from 3 years to 6 years of age. Most of the students were White middle- to high- SES. They were observed for four 15 minute sessions for the course of four weeks. The sessions were recorded with video cameras.

The evidence in this study was consistent with the hypothesis that children's way of behaving in and resolving conflicts are influenced by interactions with specific peers. It appears that children's social awareness as well as individual development and behavior styles play a role in how children resolve conflicts. It was found that almost half of the conflicts were due to disputes over objects and the other half were due to behavioral and interpersonal problems such as physical space or rule violations. There were frequent conflicts but they occurred for a short period and the children resolved most of the issues without adult intervention. Negotiation and power assertions were used more often than disengagements.

Influences of Variables in Conflict Resolution

Killen and Turiel investigated how different variables influence the types of conflicts that occur among preschool age children and how young children resolve such issues in naturalistic and semi-naturalistic settings (1991, p. 241). They looked at the sources of conflicts (from physical harm to social order), the outcomes of the conflicts (from positive response from instigator to adult or child intervention), and the methods of resolution (from bargaining to reconciliation).

Participants consisted of 69 children ages 2 ½ to 5 years from three preschools (Killen & Turiel, 1991, p. 243). These children came from middle class families. They were all observed during free-play. Eighteen children from the first preschool also participated in semi-structured peer-group sessions in groups of three.

Naturally, it appears that young children are capable of resolving conflicts on their own without any adult intervention. Although children tend to resolve more of their own conflicts in a peer-group setting than did during free-play. At any rate, children's conflicts are not always aggressive nor are they selfish disputes. Children are able to accommodate and respond in a mature way toward their peers by way of negotiation. In addition, "children's social interactions and their social contexts are multi-dimensional" (Killen and Turiel, 1991, 254). They can respond in many ways from one situation to another.

Preferences in Conflict Resolution Strategies

Iskandar, Laursen, Finkelstein, and Fredrickson (1995) investigated young children's preferences in conflict resolution strategies by using hypothetical disputes (p. 361). They wanted to examine how children look at and understand the processes of conflict resolution.

Forty-eight children ages 31 to 72 months enrolled in 5 half-day university laboratory nursery schools participated (Iskandar et al., 1995, pp. 361-362). All participants were Anglo-Americans except for 3. The children were interviewed twice individually. The first interview was to find the friendship status of each child. The second interview were puppet shows depicting hypothetical conflicts. They covered three types of resolution strategies: negotiation (equivalent outcomes), power assertion (unequal outcomes), and disengagement (withdrawal).

It appears that children knew of the different types of resolution strategies and preferred negotiation over power assertion and disengagement. Additionally, most of the children usually avoided the use of power assertion. These suggestions indicated that young children are capable of resolving conflicts in a mature manner, but it partly depends on how much exposure they had with social interaction.

Issues in Conflict Resolution

Chen, Fein, Killen, and Tam analyzed issues and resolution strategies in preschool children's peer conflict among 2 to 4 year olds (2001, p. 525). A total of 400 children and 67 teachers participated in this study. The ethnic backgrounds were Caucasian, African-American, Asian, Middle-Eastern, and others. The majority were from middle-class families.

The procedure involved videotaping children in a naturalistic classroom setting during free play or center time (Chen et al., 2001, p. 531). A priori comparisons for tests of homogeneity was used to test conflict issues and child resolution strategies among the three age groups.

The researchers found that most of the conflicts were in fact not aggressive, which supports their assumption that children's conflicts become more positively social as they get older because their constant interaction with others fosters a more friendly interaction. It appears that the older the children, by age 4, the more likely negotiations were the method of choice in resolving conflicts. The younger children around age 2 used more assertive methods of conflict resolution.

Teacher Training in Conflict Resolution

Vestal and Jones examined whether training preschool teachers in conflict resolution promotes more conflict resolution strategies prosocial interactions in young children (2004, p. 133). The study consisted of 64 children attending Head Start programs from families of low SES. Children were between the ages of 3 and 5 years.

Six teachers were trained in conflict resolution and 5 teachers participated in the control group (Vestal & Jones, 2004, pp. 133-134). The teacher training involved a 40-hour course that was considered college credit. The teachers were administered pre-post test interviews for 40 minutes each and the children were only given the posttest because the researchers considered other research that stated children had little to no experience with conflict resolution training.

This study suggests children who were exposed to conflict resolution strategies taught or discussed by their teachers resolved significantly more conflicts than those children who were not exposed to teachers who were trained in the area of conflict resolution. In addition, children who were in the trained group were better able to come up with more mature methods than those in the control group.

Gender Differences in Conflict Resolution

Holmes-Lonergan did an investigation on gender differences in conflict resolution skills in preschool children among mixed-sex and same-sex dyads (2003, p. 505). Sixty children between the ages of 3 and 5 years from northwest Florida participated in the study. The children came from middle- to upper middle-class families. The sample consisted of 2 African Americans, 2 Asian Americans, and 56 European Americans.

The procedure involved video recordings of one testing session that lasted about 20 minutes each, two structured problem solving tasks, and one less structured task (Holmes-Lonergan, 2003, p. 508). The study was measured based on verbal interactions, nonverbal interactions, and task success. Verbal interactions consisted of behaviors of control, mitigation, information, miscellaneous, counter, agreement, reason, and experimenter. Nonverbal interactions consisted of behaviors of control, mitigation, indecision, and gestures.

Results indicated that girls used more mitigating behaviors than boys, but was not consistent with other research in that boys used more controlling behaviors than girls. Further, children in mixed-sex dyads use of controlling nonverbal behaviors almost doubled compared to children in same-sex dyads. The point is, children as young as 3 years of age are capable of interacting with others in a

mature and positive way in conflicts in order to complete tasks. Girls and boys use different methods of behavior with different groups of peers as well as with different tasks.

Nature of Conflict Resolution

Vespo and Pedersen studied the nature of preschool children's conflicts (1995, p. 192). The first study was done with peers and the second with siblings in relation to types of relationship, gender and age, and situational factors. Children ages 1 ½ to 6 years participated in the study. There were 36 children in the peer group and 32 children in the sibling group. Majority of the children were from middle- to upper-middle-class Caucasian families

Video recordings of the observations were made in both the peer dyads and the sibling dyads (Vespo & Pedersen, 1995, p. 192). The peer dyads were observed in a laboratory playroom and the sibling dyads were observed in the laboratory playroom with the mother or father.

It appears that there were more conflicts in same-sex dyads than in mixed-sex dyads. Preschoolers used both verbal and gestures to resolve conflicts, but mostly verbal. There were no differences in how often conflicts occurred between peers or siblings but in sibling dyads, the older sibling was more likely to protest. In general, conflicts were brief and the interactions between the children were peaceful. This study is also consistent with other research in that young children's conflicts are usually not aggressive.

Gender Segregation in Conflict Resolution

Sims, Hutchins, and Taylor examined gender-segregated behaviour of 50 3-year-old children attending child care centres in Perth (1998, p. 1). All the children were videotaped for 20 minutes each during free play indoor and outdoor. Microphones were attached to each child in a traveller's pouch that each wore.

The researchers categorized the outcomes into three groups: if the children interacted after the conflict, if the children continued playing parallel after the conflict, and if the children separated after the conflict (Sims et al., 1998, p. 6).

Most of the conflicts occurred because of a behaviour and not over an object. When boys faced a conflicted situation, they were more likely to either resolve the conflict or continue to play together or just break the relationship and stopped playing with or around each other. Girls, on the other hand, were more likely to play parallel with each other after a conflict.

Effects of Emotion in Conflict Resolution

Dunn, Slomkowski, Donelan, and Herrera examined how children's emotional state affected how they resolved their conflicts with different relationships at different age levels (1995, p. 307). The participants consisted of 50 second-born Caucasian children from central Pennsylvania. They ranged from 16 months to 73 months of age.

The children were observed with their mothers, siblings, and peers at 33, 40, and 47 months old (Dunn et al., 1995, p. 307). The observations were done at each family's home. The observations were tape recorded twice for 1 hour and 15 minutes each.

The results suggest that children are less likely to use reasonable conflict resolution strategies when they are in distress. This is especially so at 33 months but at 47 months, it appears that the older and more experienced they grew, the more likely they would use reasonable methods of resolution whether or not they were upset.

Types of Conflict Resolution

Caplan, Vespo, Pedersen, and Hay examined whether 1 or 2 year olds' conflicts were more instrumental or social and how they resolved their conflicts (1991, p. 1514). Ninety-six 1 to 2 year olds from middle-class families participated. The observations were videotaped for 25 minutes each during free play while the parents were in the room (Caplan et al., 1991, p. 1515). The resolutions were coded as either yielding (release of toy to peer) or prosocial (offer toy or affection to peer)

It appears that 1 year olds tend to use more force that is instrumental but there were more conflicts between the 2 year olds than the 1-year-old children. In addition, the older the children the more prosocial method of conflict resolution were observed.

In summary, the studies indicate that as often as conflicts occur in early childhood, they are not predominantly aggressive. Children as young as 1 to 6 years of age are capable of displaying certain resolution strategies in different settings with different peers, siblings, or adults.

Social-Emotional Development Versus Academics

The need to teach academic skills often takes precedence for teachers over the desire to teach conflict resolution procedures. Harris (2002) asserted that teachers of young children are urged to focus their efforts on developing children's academic skills over social ones. Harris and other researchers (Adams & Sasse Wittmer, 2001; Arcaro-McPhee, Doppler, & Harkins, 2002; Chen, 2003) have recognized that peace and character education are a part of our society's foundation; however, academic achievement has begun to take precedence over this foundation. The problem that many educators and administrators have regarding teaching conflict resolution skills is that it takes time away from academic readiness skills; test scores in subject areas such as mathematical and reading skills are important. This causes teachers to engage in a deficit mentality—the idea that if time is given to one subject it must be taken away from another. They do not consider the idea that conflict resolution skills can actually be embedded in the daily curriculum. Fagan and Mihalic (2003) confirmed this in a study involving a three-year program implemented by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence involving giving life skills training in middle and junior high schools. Fagan and Mihalic (2003) stated that teachers did not want to take away from the more academic courses. It was further noted that when the Prevention of Violence program was implemented, teachers and administrators tended to lack follow-through. They ended conflict resolution training practices because they were not convinced that the program was producing results.

Responses to Conflict

In this study, three general responses to conflict were studied: avoidance, competition, and cooperation. With regard to avoidance, it has been observed in several studies that educators frequently end conflict episodes quickly in order to reestablish peace (Arcaro-McPhee, Doppler, and Harkins, 2002; Chen, 2003). Sometimes educators wish so badly to have peace that they

overlook long-term solutions in favor of temporary ones. By not engaging in the process of conflict resolution, educators apply quick fixes to problems woven deeper into the social fabric of the classroom. To teach peace, strategies for obtaining and maintaining peace must be acquired. By engaging in the practice of *avoiding* conflict so long as peace seems to prevail, educators are neglecting opportunities to teach conflict resolution processes that are necessary for the future development of their students.

Early childhood educators also use *competitive* resolution strategies (Kaiser and Skylar Rasminsky, 2003). Aggression and the misuse of power can occur between those in conflict. Kreidler (1984) explored conflict resolution between teachers and those experiencing conflicts in classrooms. In his research, the authoritarian teacher was viewed as one who used a competitive strategy. This style of teaching is often adopted because it seems to produce quick results, but it denies the children the chance to learn how to solve conflicts in the future. When dictating to students how to resolve conflicts, instead of allowing them to become an active part of the process, the teacher asserts power and maintains control, creating a solution in which one party wins and another loses. In competitive resolutions, power is often used to determine clear winners and losers in the situation. *Cooperative* strategies are the most desirable conflict resolution strategies for teachers of young children to use because they embrace empathy and perspective taking. In cooperative strategies, the teacher takes on and models the role of mediator to children in situations of conflict (Stanulis and Manning, 2002). Social learning theorists such as Bandura (1969) have noted that by modeling desirable methods of resolving conflict, teachers enable children to learn effective strategies for future interactions (cited in Stanulis and Manning, 2002).

Educators' Attitudes to Conflict

Research has indicated that teachers are often not comfortable with the conflict resolution strategies they use in their classrooms (Girard and Koch, 1996; Martin, Linfoot, and Stephenson, 1999). Many teachers feel unprepared to deal with conflict. Faced with conflict in their classrooms, teachers uncomfortable with conflict commonly respond with avoidance

(Martin, Linfoot, and Stephenson, 1999). Teachers refer the student(s) to other teachers or administrators instead of dealing with the problem themselves. Martin and colleagues discovered in their study that the more teachers worried about the occurrence of conflict in their classrooms, the less confident they felt in their ability to deal with it. Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge of several strategies to deal with conflict because one strategy will not fit every situation. The more tools a teacher has to draw on when faced with conflict, the more capable and confident he or she will feel to deal with it. The attitude of the teacher toward conflict is significant in the resolution strategies used in the classroom. Wheeler (2004) studied the climate in schools and the impact of teacher attitude on conflict resolution strategies used by the teachers. He noticed that schools focusing on preparing students for academic readiness tended to use authoritarian strategies. The teachers often issued orders, telling children how to resolve conflict instead of helping them learn a process for resolution. This was attributed to the fact that teaching a process for resolution is too time-consuming. In the classrooms studied, Wheeler also

discovered that teachers tended to view conflict as a negative concept instead of an opportunity for learning and growth.

Theoretical Constructs

Two primary theories are relevant to the strategies of conflict resolution used by early childhood educators. Behaviorist theory is frequently used because it is effective. The practices of positive and negative reinforcement are the most well known among educators. A child will often act in order to achieve a desirable outcome. Another theory that has roots in behaviorism is social learning theory, which suggests that people learn on the strength of social reinforcers and influences. Behaviorism assumes that there is a heavy influence of the environment on the development of the individual (Skinner, 1974). Behaviorist theory is an approach that is commonly used in conflict resolution with young children thanks to its efficiency and popularity. Behaviorist strategies are often so effective in early childhood settings that they are accepted instead of critically examined. Teachers often resort to behaviorist practices because they are effective, not because they promote the child's ability to solve conflict in the future. When educators engage in practices that require reinforcements, often only short-term results are produced. If the reinforcements are no longer forthcoming, the desired behaviors are often extinguished (Skinner, 1974). Social learning theory is also relevant to the early childhood educator in situations of conflict, except according to this theory emphasis is placed on the role of the educator as a model for the child. When children observe the significant adults in their lives engage in positive conflict resolution, involving defining the problem and recognizing the needs of others, they are affected in dealing with their own future conflict (Kreidler, 1984). Social learning theory also addresses issues involved in intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. According to social learning theory, by engaging in a socially reinforced or expected behavior one begins developing certain attitudes that are then internalized. Self-reinforcement can then occur (Bandura, 1969).

Practical Strategies to Foster Conflict Resolution Skills in Early Childhood Settings

Many disagreements that occur in the classroom can be resolved amongst the children themselves, if they have the necessary vocabulary and communication skills, and if they are encouraged to be responsible for working out interpersonal conflicts by talking to each other. It is important to clarify to children the occasions when it is imperative that they seek adult intervention. Frequently, instead of speaking directly to one another about an issue, young children learn to just say, "I'm telling", and expect adults to resolve the conflict for them. In order for children to further develop social competencies, it's important to assist them in acquiring the skills that can facilitate conflict resolution. The focus is on expressing feelings and finding a solution, rather than on blaming someone for the problem. Educators must model the appropriate language and behaviours in their interactions with children and adults.

Once children have developed the necessary vocabulary and communication skills, they can become "peacekeepers" and act as peer mediators, assisting other children in resolving social disputes by using **Active Listening** skills and communicating "**I-Messages**".

Active Listening

It is common to hear people tell others, "don't be mad", "don't be scared", "don't be sad", "don't cry", etc. However, people need to be able to express their feelings and they need to be heard. Check in with children by inquiring about their feelings and by providing a safe, nonjudgmental environment for self-expression. Validate feelings by reflecting back what has been expressed and by demonstrating empathy, so that children will know that they are not alone and that others often share similar frustrations and feelings in such situations. (After feelings have been expressed by each party in the dispute, you can move on to problem-solving.) Paraphrase, rather than restate, what was said:

"It sounds like you're feeling (emotion). Is that right? I might feel the same way if that happened to me."

Sample Active Listening Statements

"I hear that you're feeling 'upset' about _____ (event). Does that seem to fit? It's okay to have your feelings."

"So you're feeling _____ (emotion) because _____ (event)? Yes, sometimes people feel _____ when that kind of thing occurs."

(Modelled language is simplified and expanded according to the ages and stages of development of the people involved)

Activity:

In groups of two or three, each person shares a negative or distressing event from when they were in school. The listener should make a concerted effort to use active listening to reflect back and validate what is being said. (Take turns being the speaker and the listener.)

"I-Messages"

First, each person takes ownership of their part in the dispute by stating how they feel under the circumstances. (Statements begin with "I", rather than "You" in order to reduce the likelihood of blaming and to focus instead on self-expression and problem-solving.) Next, each person states what they want to happen. Finally, each person states what they will do differently.

Sample "I-Messages"

Three Part I-Message Format:

- 1.) I feel: _____
- 2.) I want: _____
- 3.) I will: _____

Scenario:

Johnny is looking at a book when Sally comes by and grabs the book from him. Johnny slaps Sally and she starts to cry.

Peacekeepers: The Director, Teachers, and designated children are Peacekeepers.

Peacekeepers can assist in resolving the dispute in the location that it occurs, or they can invite the children in the disagreement to come to the designated Peace Table to discuss the matter.

Peacekeeper encourages the children in the dispute to tell what happened and utilizes active listening skills. Peacekeeper then encourages the children to talk to each other, using I-Messages in the 3 part format:

1.) First, each person states their feelings under the circumstances:

Johnny: *"I feel upset when people take my things."*

Sally: *"I feel mad when people hit me."*

2.) Next, each person states what change they want to take place:

Johnny: *"I want you to ask me if you can have the book when I'm finished, instead of grabbing it from me."*

Sally: *"I want you to talk to me instead of hitting me."*

3.) Finally, each person says what they will do differently to resolve the problem now (and if it arises again in the future) by restating above.

Johnny: *"I will talk to you instead of hitting you when I'm feeling upset."*

Sally: *"I will ask you to share the book when you're finished."*

Apologies and forgiveness are modeled and suggested ("I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" or "It's okay"), if it seems that they're in order, but they should not be forced, since that would encourage insincerity.

Activity:

I-Messages and Active Listening can be used to diffuse emotionally charged situations and resolve conflicts among children, as well as with adults, such as parents and staff.

In pairs, one person assumes the role of a parent. The parent is upset and vents her concern to the director. She is disturbed because her child's teacher only tells her about the child's inappropriate behaviors. She feels that the teacher never has anything good to say about the little boy. The other person assumes the role of the director and discusses the matter with the parent.

Next, the person who was the director plays the role of the teacher. The person who was the parent becomes the director and discusses the issue with the teacher.

Make a conscious effort to utilize I-Messages and Active Listening during these conversations.

Benefits and challenges confronting conflict resolution skills in early childhood classrooms.

Effective conflict resolution strategies have numerous advantages for students. For example, children improve their problem-solving skills and become independent thinkers. Such a context encourages students to discuss their problems and offer alternative solutions that are fair for each party involved in the conflict. Additionally, the communication skills of children are enhanced because students must express their problems and feelings in a straightforward way. Furthermore, when working through a conflict, children gain an awareness of the viewpoints of their fellow students. Thus, the perspective-taking skills of the students are enhanced. Finally, students are better able to discuss their disagreements as they collaboratively problem solve.

The overall classroom atmosphere is also enriched as a result of using such conflict resolution strategies. For example, academic learning time increases because the teacher quickly resolves conflicts. Thus, fewer interruptions occur during class time. Furthermore, successful implementation of these conflict resolution strategies reduces occurrences of misbehavior and lessens tension, thereby improving classroom interactions.

One major disadvantage of implementing such a conflict resolution approach in a classroom is the time investment needed to introduce the appropriate problem-solving strategies to students. A teacher should plan to invest a great deal of time and effort to create a conducive environment that is open and trusting, where children feel free to share their thoughts and emotions, because the resolution of any conflict is dependent upon such a climate. Although it may be time consuming, over the long run, implementing such a process actually saves time later because fewer disruptions occur. One teacher at another school in the county agreed that implementing a conflict resolution strategy takes a great deal of time initially, but felt the time necessary for implementation was worth utilizing such an approach. It costs more instructional time at the beginning, but later it saves you time. Time should not be the determining factor as to whether or not teachers choose to implement such strategies in their classrooms. There are programs that help teachers minimize preparation time needed for the development and implementation of conflict resolution strategies.

Summary and conclusion.

Conflict is a situation in which the people involved are frustrated because they feel unable to satisfy some of their need. The needs and wants of each person or group are incompatible with those of the others involved in the conflict.. Children have many needs, such as the need for friendship, power, and self-esteem. In any classroom environment, there are bound to be incidences in which the needs of one student are incompatible with those of another student. If these conflicts go unresolved, they may eventually lead to disruptive behavior in the classroom. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers examine the conflicts that do occur in their classrooms and provide an opportunity for their resolution before they escalate. When the teacher makes an effort to turn classroom conflicts into learning experiences, the students benefit and the likelihood that the same conflicts will reoccur is reduced (Kredler, 1984).

If for some reason students are unable to solve their own problems, the teacher will need to act as a mediator. The role of the teacher as a mediator is to listen impartially without taking sides in the argument and help the students reach an agreement. While mediating a student conflict, the teacher makes the students listen to one another and repeat what the other student has said and does not

allow for interruption by either party involved. After the students talk about the problem, the teacher summarizes what he or she thinks the students are saying to ensure that the students know how the other parties involved perceive the problem. Next, the teacher asks the students to explain to one another how they feel and then he or she points out areas of agreement. Then, the teacher asks the students to offer solutions to the problem and helps them to evaluate these solutions. Finally, the teacher helps the students reach a fair agreement.

Initially, teachers may find it beneficial to give students several conflict scenarios and ask them how they would respond if the problems involved them. Children need to have a great deal of practice with solving conflicts before they can begin to internalize the behaviors associated with a conflict resolution process. In order for students to learn to express their needs, rights, and feelings in a way that is direct and honest, and non-threatening, it will take practice.

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