

Fair shares

How should you approach the idea of sharing when children seem to be finding it difficult? *Kay Mathieson* provides some guidance on workable strategies and realistic expectations

Q The children in our setting really find sharing very difficult and every day seems filled with squabbles and conflicts. Will they just grow out of this, is it what they learn from home, and can we do something about it or is this just the way it is in early years? One child in particular is very quarrelsome and the other children are now moving away from him when he is at an activity and not wanting to play with him.

A Conflicts are an inevitable part of life and an amazing opportunity for learning. Through conflict we learn about ourselves, others and how relationships work.

Conflicts for young children take a variety of different forms. Often when we first think about the children's conflicts we see stamping feet, lashing out and shouting, but there is much more to it. It can simply arise because they are not thinking the same thing in their play, and often children resolve conflict with or without verbal language.

For example, two children are observed digging a channel in the sand pit for water. One stops and looks while the other continues digging. Then both happy with the activity, one digs in one direction, one in another. Although there is no shouting, stamping or hitting, this is still a conflict and the children have demonstrated one possible resolution strategy – both accepting to do something different.

To support children in their understanding, practitioners need to pick up on these early demonstrations of resolution and highlight how they have worked.

DEMONSTRATING THE BEHAVIOUR WE WANT

As professionals, we show different responses to conflict, not just between children but also in conflicts with our

colleagues. How do we resolve a small disagreement about whose turn it is to wash out the paint pots, or cover for an absent colleague? Children observe and feel how these situations play out, absorbing information about conflicts and the related emotions.

Conflict typically arises from: wanting something someone else has, wanting to do something someone else is doing, or trying to decide between different options. Ideally, children need to be able to experience a balance between giving way sometimes, and standing up for themselves other times – but mostly, trying out as many different solutions as possible.

It is important that practitioners are alert to children who either always 'give in' or always 'get their own way'. To develop the thinking that accompanies constructive problem-solving, children should be supported to engage in conflict resolution more as a problem-solving experience than a 'winning or losing' one.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Children who are encouraged to explore and develop 'negotiating' language in practical situations are also being supported to develop their thinking about problem-solving and influencing things around them.

Typically, children's language will demonstrate their current level of understanding. Those who are able to 'bargain' with adults about an extra bedtime story or a second piece of fruit 'for the other hand' are working this out and applying the skill to different situations. For those whose language is not yet at this stage, it is even more important that others correctly interpret their communication.

CHILDREN'S INTENTIONS

Some children have more experience than others of seeing adults working out disagreements. We are in the perfect context to show a range of strategies, such as: listening to

others, finding a compromise, taking turns, using timers, and offering an alternative.

For example, an older child finding ways to deal with a younger child taking their toys experiences a steep learning curve. The adult attitude is crucial in scaffolding their thinking. The older child may first snatch the toy; if the adult gets cross then no new strategy has been learned



The child is trying to communicate that they would like to join in

but resentment will be increased. However, if the adult helps the older child find something more interesting for the younger one to have, not only is there a new strategy but the older child's own feelings have been acknowledged and valued.

Sharing toys and equipment is a constant source of concern for practitioners, who hear frequent cries of 'he/she/they can't share'. If we recognise that each child's understanding will be different and that sharing is a weird and complex concept, we have a good starting point.

Obviously, saying 'you need to share' doesn't help a child understand how to do it; in fact, we often demonstrate sharing by taking something away from a child as we say those words. Actively using different ways of sharing out equipment as we work with children, and making sure that 'sharing' is experienced

as 'giving' and 'receiving', is much more supportive.

THE SKILL SET

There are some specific skills needed to resolve a conflict. These include:

- listening
- showing/telling your wants
- holding in mind your own wish and understanding another's wish
- thinking about a solution
- deciding if a solution is worth accepting
- being actively involved in the agreed solution.

This is complex thinking. A child wanting to join in another's play may communicate by hitting out, taking a toy, or pushing a child out of the way to have their turn. The intention is not unkind, but the act can be interpreted as deliberately hurtful. This is important, because the way adults respond



MORE INFORMATION

- *Children's Friendships*, J Dunn
- *I am Two! Working with two-year-olds and their families* by K Mathieson, The British Association for Early Childhood Education
- *Identifying Special Needs in the Early Years* by K Mathieson
- *Social Skills in the Early Years* by K Mathieson
- *Socioemotional Development in the Toddler Years: transitions and transformations*, C A Brownell and C B Kopp (eds) (2007), The Guildford Press
- *Supporting Children with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties*, Inclusion Development Programme, DCSF, www.foundationyears.org.uk
- *Understanding Behaviour in the Early Years* by K Mathieson
- *Young Children's Close Relationships* by J Dunn

Children should be supported to see conflict resolution as a problem-solving experience

will be based on their interpretation of what they have seen, as will the way they talk to the children about it.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Developmentally, it is not realistic to expect children around two years of age to share, so it is important to ensure that the resourcing of your setting takes this into account. Also, a child may be three, four or five, but working at a different level developmentally in this particular social skill.

Use evidence from a range of situations to build your understanding of the strategies that the child is currently able to use. If a child has one strategy, we need to help them learn one more, and so on. Remember any new strategy will take a little while to work as effectively as their current familiar one.

Also, we need to help other children recognise the positive intention behind the action. The child is trying to communicate that they would like to join in or play with the other child. We need to interpret this and demonstrate an alternative strategy, such as saying the child's name, taking a 'play' card to them, or touching them more gently. Getting this physical pressure right is very hard for children as they are developing their co-ordination, strength and dexterity, so we need realistic expectations.

INVOLVING PARENTS

Parents get very anxious about their children being involved in conflicts. Positively including parents in our thinking and understanding of the strategies that their child is using can build their confidence. We can talk about encouraging them in practical situations, sharing, and taking turns with adults as well as other children.

Use times when there is no pressure or strong emotions involved to share thinking with children about different ways of engaging others in play. It is, of course, unlikely that children will say 'please can I play' unless an adult is present, but it is useful to observe children and identify how they are engaging with each other. Typically, this can be playing alongside another child, smiling, looking, watching, copying or just taking part.

Again, the way in which adults interpret the actions they are seeing makes a difference to their thinking. Focusing on the positive and successful strategies is much more effective than emphasising when things have gone wrong. ■