C HAPTER 3

Dealing with Conflict

In this chapter the following questions will be considered:

1 What skills do we need to communicate effectively?

2 How can we break down social interaction into skills which can be practised?

3 What can we do to help children learn how to deal with conflict appropriately?

Making connections with others is important to us. The majority of our communication is non-verbal. It is important to check out the messages we actually give and receive. We can support and plan for children's social learning including a focus on social language and the three stages of an interaction. Accepting that conflict is an inevitable part of all our lives enables us to change our negative view to one of opportunity for social learning. Adults behaviour directly affects the behaviour of the children.

Learning to Manage our own Behaviour and Finding Ways to Maximize our Communication Skills

Our lives are governed by communication and degrees of social connection. Seldom do we take the opportunity to consider what is involved in a 'successful' interaction, but we know how good it feels when it happens! Everything about us communicates something about ourselves, from the clothes we wear, the activities we choose to take part in, to the words we say.

Opportunity to reflect

If we were a visitor to our setting and met ourselves, what messages would we receive?

Consider the messages we give through our clothes, body language, verbal language, facial expressions and tone of voice.

In direct communication with each other, the key elements involved are:

- facial expressions
- body language
- tone of voice
- specific words.

Generally, research shows that 85–95 per cent of our communication is non-verbal. This should lead us to think more carefully about the way we use the other elements to get our message across. Somehow when we are communicating, particularly with children, we assume that they will not notice the difference in our tone of voice or the expression we have on our faces.

Sometimes we even think that they should do as we say no matter how we say it! The confusing result may be that adults will use a soft tone of voice or a smile when telling a child they should not do something. Children will understand that adults are talking about them, and whether this is positive or negative, well before they are skilled in their own verbal communication. Therefore, assuming that children do not understand what we say over their heads is totally unrealistic and can lead to some very unpleasant misunderstandings when children respond to what they have understood from such adult communications.

Even if children do not understand the words, they will get messages from our other communication skills. Children are very skilled at picking up meaning and intention from our body language and tone – the same words spoken in different ways will result in very different responses from the same audience. I believe that the first thing children (and adults) look for in an interaction is whether the tone and body language suggests this is going to be a pleasant or unpleasant interaction. Even as adults we make a split-second assessment before we either relax to hear and respond to what is said or we start looking for a way out or a defence. An example is the very quick response from some children of, 'It wasn't me', before you clarify what incident you are talking about. The adult defensive comment 'he's always like that, no one else can do anything with him either' before you have a chance to talk about using different strategies, is another. Both responses involve the receiver of your message feeling that the chances are you are going to criticize or blame them for something. Needless to say our previous experiences of the situation, knowledge of your usual response, guilt about something we could have done better etc. will affect how sensitive we are to reading the 'accusing' message.

The difficulty with taking this type of approach is that it has little scope for learning. The person giving the message has set the tone, the receiver is hiding behind whatever defence they can gather and there is no opportunity for joint problem-solving. The approach to a situation can often set the tone of the interaction. Being clear about the message we want to give and ensuring that our facial expression, body language and tone of voice all say the same thing, gives us the best chance of getting our message across clearly.

As adults we frequently read inaccurately communication from others. We think they are angry when they are not, we think they are indifferent we they are not etc. Children, I think, whilst frequently getting the tone right are often confused over the detail. They have, after all, had less time to practise!

This cocktail of messages and misunderstandings can only be tackled through getting to know each other more and checking out what we have understood from an interaction. Also involved in this process is checking that the message we intended is the one that got through. For example, 'I needed your help quickly because I was worried that Ahmed would get hurt' gives the opportunity for a discussion about whether this message was received or misunderstood as you being angry.

If you have had situations where communication has been confused with a particular person, it is worth reviewing ways in which you can make your message simpler and clearer. This might include choosing your time to talk, choosing a suitable place, being physically on the same level as the person you are speaking to, inviting their comments first and ensuring that your facial expression matches the message you want to give. For example, if you want to give a positive, welcoming message you would use an open, relaxed body stance, not folded arms and pointing fingers!

All this can seem very complicated but practised over time, like any other skill, it becomes easier and more effective. Helping children to learn about communication is a long slow process – after all, we as adults are still practising! There are many activities we can use to provide opportunity to practise without feeling the emotion of the interaction, which is often what causes the confusion. This can be done through the use of pictures of various facial expressions and interactions. These can be used as the starting point for discussion about what might be said, felt and thought during the conversation. Puppets, story books and prepared scenarios are further ways to help children explore with you the different ways a particular conversation could develop. Rather than trying to find a 'right' answer, it is more helpful to find a variety of different possible outcomes. This can help to follow through the choices of response to a consequence – question prompts along the lines of 'What might happen next', 'What if ...' or 'What could Sammy say to help make things feel better for Sana?'

In the real-life situation, with children in the setting, adults can help to clarify for children the message they are giving by reflecting back to them what you have understood; for example, 'You sound angry, you really want to have a turn on the bike don't you?' This can be combined with opportunities for small groups of children to suggest different words and ways of saying things to each other. Alternatively, through discussion, ask children to find phrases which could be used to ask others to play, and making a display with photographs with the phrases written in speech bubbles. This display can then be used as a reminder and prompt at the appropriate time.

Free-play situations are often thought of by adults as a lovely carefree time for children, but is often far from reality. A big space, a large group of children and a selection of equipment can be very confusing and worrying. Social language for this situation needs to be taught and children's thinking associated with the opportunities available. Preparation for going outside might include some discussion about what the children are thinking about doing first, who they might want to play with first etc.

When we think about language it is important to clarify what we really mean. The two key functions of language I would suggest are:

- to convey meaning
- to establish and hold a connection.

There are five main aspects to our experience of language, each of them complex in their own right and integral to the communication process:

- noises
- words and phrases
- associations and nuances
- body language
- facial expressions.

Changes in the noises we make, accents and different languages will affect the receiver of our message, perhaps requiring more intense listening skills or coming to terms with previous experiences of someone with a similar accent. Phrases and words may have different associations for the speaker than the listener, which will affect their shared understanding. Facial expression, body language and gesture can completely change the meaning of our words. Basically, the more you think about it the more complex the process becomes but we all manage to communicate effectively, at least with some people some of the time. It can be useful to consider that each interaction has three distinct stages.

The Three Stages of an Interaction

Every interaction has three stages, a beginning a middle and an end. We consider a child taking part in an activity with two friends.

Beginning

There has to be a way of getting into or starting the activity. Key phrases like 'Can I play?' and 'I want to play too' are likely to be used but there will also be facial expressions and body language which affect the response received to the request. Opportunities to try out different phrases and ways of saying them, and encouraging children to say if it would make them want to play or not, allows time to practise without the likelihood of it ending in conflict. Although this will not automatically change the children's behaviour and responses to each other, it will gradually build the vocabulary and range of responses that children are able to use. It is important that we look at both sides of the communication. What does it feel like to deliver the phrase and, equally, what does it feel like to be on the receiving end?

This way of working does have implications for some of our thinking about our responses to children's friendships and sharing in the setting. It is not realistic for all children and all adults in the setting to be best friends, but it is reasonable to have a consistent level of tolerance and support which is expected and encouraged. This means that the adults need to clarify and agree responses to children not wanting to play with each other or only wanting to spend time with one particular friend. The most effective approach is probably to emphasize that we have different friends related to different activities; for example, friends to build with, read with, sing with etc. It is important that we support parents to encourage this idea too, as it can be seen as a major milestone for children settling in to a new setting to have found a friend. The pressure to achieve this can be a barrier to the friendship actually happening. The other consequence is that, should the friendship end, this is seen as a disaster, not only because the friend has been lost but that the child has failed to achieve what all the adults expected. The child is left with a sense of failure which is disproportional to the actual event.

Middle

The middle part of the interaction is about maintaining connection, negotiating, finding out about each other and experimenting with ideas. We invest a lot of time and words on this section as adults. It is important to us that we give and receive messages that people want to keep

talking to us, listening to us and giving us positive messages about being with us. Talking about the weather is an obvious example. It does not actually matter if it is raining or sunny but it is a common experience which we can use to make a connection with someone. Making a connection is one of the first experiences we have as very young babies and something most of us continue to seek as adults.

End

The end part of the interaction is the most likely to go wrong and the time when conflict often occurs. This is the time when we have to find an acceptable way of saying that, 'I no longer want to be here, with you, doing this activity'. The likelihood is that someone will experience feelings of rejection, disappointment or anger which will find expression in raised voices or hitting out.

There is no recipe for an immediate improvement to any inappropriate behaviour or response. However, like all learning it can be seen as a process which can be broken down into small steps or stages. For example, to help improve the end stage of the interaction described we would want to know the present frequency of conflict. From this baseline we can set our realistic expectations for improvement, if it is now ten incidents per day, initially we would be looking at a reduction to perhaps eight per day. To check progress we would want to review this after three weeks. The essential part of the process is to then decide what action the adults need to take to support the change. First, there will be some teaching required, this may be about key phrases which are acceptable ways of saying you want to leave the activity. The idea would be to begin to develop a stock of phrases from which children can select one which they feel happy to use. Inevitably, some children will already be able to make several suggestions, whilst others will need to work with one phrase for a considerable time before they are ready to experiment with others. The more subtle bit of identifying these phrases is that, while the focus is on the user of the phrase, the receiving of the phrase is put in context. If another child uses one of the key phrases to you, for example, then there is a beginning of the understanding that it does not mean that they hate you, will never play with you again etc., but just that they have had enough of this game at this moment. This begins to reduce the degree of rejection felt by some children.

There will never be a time or even a day when there is no conflict between anyone in your setting. This is the reality of life and our drive to attempt to have our own needs met in competition with the others present. Conflict is inevitable. What we need to focus on is developing a variety of ways to explore and resolve the conflict. The first step is to consider our view of conflict, trying to shift our thinking from purely negative to an opportunity for learning.

Adults have all developed different responses to conflict and it is useful to identify your own before trying to work on the children's. You may feel anxious, frightened, excited, angry or determined. Conflict and our response to it is closely related to our feelings about what level of control we find acceptable in different situations. For example, what do we think colleagues are thinking about us if the child we are working with is behaving inappropriately? If we assume they are critical of us, our response could then be to publicly blame the child so that our role and responsibility is minimized. This can lead to labelling the child as 'naughty' 'loud' or 'troublesome'. As we have already discussed, such labels lead to children making their behaviour fit the label and adults looking for proof that the label is well earned. As 'grown-ups' we have a

greater range of knowledge about managing our behaviour than children. It is therefore down to us to take the initiative to change the script for the situation, children will not be in a position to do that without our help and support.

Children can experience the same range of emotions and have the same difficulty in dealing with conflict as adults. In reality the difficulty is not in the conflict but in the unresolved conflicts which we can keep returning to and adding to our belief system about conflict. For example, experience might lead us to believe that, 'I never win anything', 'If I shout loudest I will win', 'I have to win', 'Mine is the only answer', 'You're older/more senior/more confident, therefore you will win'. We can also start to look for ways of reinforcing whatever belief system we have built – 'I'm bigger than you so any conflict we have I will win' etc. This has major implications for our interactions with children because we are inevitably, bigger, more senior, older than them.

Using Conflict as a Learning Experience

(This section is based on ideas from High/Scope).

Conflict is about trying to solve a problem jointly with one or more other people. Skills we would need to achieve this would include:

- listening

- communicating clearly our own needs and wishes

- understanding

- the ability to appreciate another's view

- co-operation

- the ability to communicate respect.

If children are able to rehearse and explore the use of these skills in the emotionally safe environment which we provide for them, they will be much better equipped as they get older to deal with conflict situations for themselves. Keeping adult language short and clear is also key in helping to get the message across when emotions are running high. All that is needed is 'no hurting' rather than a long explanation that it is not nice and that we cannot let you play again if you are going to do that and what will Mummy/Daddy say, etc. If any further discussion is needed it should be left until everything is calm again and emotions have receded. None of us are able to learn effectively when our emotions are in control because our thinking is hijacked by physiological changes in the blood flow to the brain.

For the children in our setting to receive consistent messages about appropriate ways to resolve conflict it is important that the adults have had an opportunity to discuss and agree on the approach they will take. There is no magic about the process of resolving conflict, it usually covers the following steps:

1 Tell me what has happened:

   (a) take turns

   (b) listen to each other.

2 This is what I think you have said.

3 Is that right?

4 How can we sort it out?

5 What could we do differently next time?

6 What will we do now?

If we see conflict resolution as an opportunity for learning then we need to consider how the process is used to maximize learning. The way in which the adult approaches the situation and supports children to work out a solution will be a significant part of the learning.

The first step of supporting children's learning about positive conflict resolution is for the adults who will be implementing the process to agree on the process they will use and how it will be encouraged. Some key issues which can need agreement between the adults are:

- Is it appropriate for children to say sorry after an incident?

- Can more attention be given for appropriate behaviour than inappropriate behaviour in the 'sorting out' process?

- In what ways can we ensure that children receive consistent messages about their behaviour?

- Should children always share all the equipment/toys they are using?

- Do all children need to be friends all of the time?

When agreement is reached it can be useful to extend the discussion to clarify what the adults consider to be acceptable/unacceptable behaviours in the setting. Importantly, this learning should not just be focused on children who are assertive. Children who respond in a passive way need as much support to be able to use appropriate language and to deal with a conflict situation. We need to be vigilant in intervening so that passive children are not always the ones who have to give in.

In the same way that we have broken down other learning into small steps, we can approach the conflict resolution process in the same way. For example:

1 Use a story to introduce the idea of sorting out disagreements.

2 Use puppets to role-play the situation.

3 Let children suggest ways in which the characters could sort out their difficulty.

4   Use pictures and words to make a display about the first two steps of the process – talking about what happened, listening to what is said.

5   Share with all children times when the process has been successful and support children to say how things were sorted out.

Once children are familiar with the first two steps, a similar stepped approach can be used to highlight the rest of the process. As with all learning, some children will acquire the language and idea of the process very quickly whilst others will continue to need adult help for much longer. Some of us continue to need support as adults so we must be realistic and set our aim as introducing the process to young children rather than expecting them all to be able to learn to use the process independently. For very young children the first step is for adults to use the process consistently and encourage them to explore the appropriate language needed to make the process work.

The element which makes conflict resolution so difficult is the emotion we feel about the conflict itself. Therefore it can be helpful to give children opportunities to practise the process when they themselves are not part of the conflict. This can be done very effectively through role-play, stories and helping children to suggest solutions for other children. Gradually children will begin to understand that there is no 'right' answer but a variety of possible ways to sort out the problem, which can then be agreed on. This is perhaps one of the hardest stages in the process for the adults to work with as it would be so much quicker to give our solution such as 'take turns' or 'confiscating' the toy, but by doing this we reduce the learning considerably, perhaps to, 'You always win if you are bigger'.

Inclusion

There is much discussion and debate about including all children in mainstream settings. In the majority of situations adults are becoming more welcoming and willing to work with parents to include children who experience a variety of conditions and disabilities. The greatest challenge to this principle is where the child presents behaviour which is difficult to manage. This is particularly true if the behaviour includes hurting others. As professionals working with young children, our attitude to this issue has a significant impact both on the children and families with whom we work.

The reality is that all children can, and probably will, display difficult behaviour at some time and under certain circumstances, but it is the intensity and frequency of the challenge which causes adults to feel at a loss. However, generally speaking, the key with young children is to use the same basic strategies but to increase the intensity and frequency to meet that of the behaviour. Using our knowledge of the individual child we can hypothesis about what the child is communicating through their behaviour. Noting times and situations when the behaviour is most likely to occur gives the adults the opportunity to explore ways of taking action to minimize the impact of the behaviour. This basic approach is effective in both reducing inappropriate responses and gathering specific information to help other professionals focus their skills, should this be necessary.

Including social interaction in our process of breaking down tasks into small steps, using 'can do' statements, can help to identify what action the adult needs to take to best support the child. We should avoid talking for them or making decisions over their heads. Essential to this being empowering for the child, is that we ensure all adults support positive views and images of all children. Adults must be proactive in challenging 'labelling' of children as 'naughty', 'silly' or unable to do things. Rather, a positive focus on the fact that we all need help at some time with something, that we are all learning new things and that we all make mistakes is essential to a positive learning environment. In essence, all children must be treated with respect as individuals in their own right.

It is easy to develop roles with which we feel comfortable to use in group situations and to assume that we have no way of approaching a situation in a different way. Children are already doing this in our settings and, rather than following the pattern, it can be enlightening for children to be given a specific opportunity to play a different role. For example, in imaginative play situations, if a child always takes the 'leader' role an adult can help the children to change roles for the last, say, five minutes of the game. Or they can share what it might be like not to play that role next time.

To encourage children who are less confident, create situations which give them the opportunity to share particular strengths and skills. Encourage children to help each other rather than always asking for help from an adult. Where a particular activity or element of routine causes a problem children can respond positively to some advanced warning and preparation for what is about to happen. For example, 'in five minutes we need to tidy up, where will you put your model' or offering the opportunity to show the model to another adult or to have some help to put it somewhere safe etc.

Successful social, behavioural learning can be evidenced through learning stories, which explains the sequence of events and the learning which has taken place with annotated photographs providing a positive image. This can be shared as a display or kept in the story corner in book form. This gives opportunities for successful experiences to be revisited and reinforced with or without an adult.

Our aim is to help all children and adults to learn about each others' strengths in the individual's personality rather than focusing on disabilities or difficulties. Adults can often then help children to approach difficulties through use of existing strengths.

TRAINING SESSION 3

The 'Introduction to training sessions' should be considered before delivery of this training session.

This training session relates to the text contained in chapter 3

Key Points

1 Communication skills.

2 Stages of interaction.

3 Dealing with conflict.

Notes

Each OHT provides a summary and the key points from the chapter. It is not necessary to use all of the activities but it is important to vary the role of the participants throughout the session in order to support different learning styles, i.e. seeing, hearing and doing.

The aims of this training session are to:

■ understand the elements involved in our communication skills

■ identify ways of supporting children to learn about social communication

■ use conflict resolution as a way of learning about communicating with each other.

Activities can be selected from the following suggestions and developed to suit your particular situation. The more detail identified and encouraged in discussion, the easier it will be for practitioners to put into practice. Understanding the clear parallels between adult and child learning in this session can help adults to see how difficult it is for children to manage their behaviour in the real situation.

OHT 1

■ Collections of photographs from magazines. Cover up the face and only show eyebrows at first. Ask adults to guess what the rest of the face may look like. Uncover a little more at a time and continue the process.

■ Try out different facial expressions and body language which together show:

– anger

– sadness

– fear.

OHT 2

■ Try to mix facial expressions with different body language – discuss the confusing mixture which is created. For example, smiling when saying something in an angry voice.

■ Select video clips of short interactions which illustrate the influence of body language:

■ Show a video clip of an interaction with no sound. How accurately can you predict the emotions being communicated?

■ Say the following phrases, expressing as many different emotions as possible:

– I want to see you.

– Come here.

3 CONTINUED

- – What have you done?
- – Why are you here?
- – What a surprise!
- – What is your name?
- – What are you doing?

■ Our own responses and feelings about activities will inevitably influence the way that we present them to the children. Consider individually and with colleagues the following:
- – During which activity do you find it easiest to get involved with the children?
- – If a visitor was watching you involved in this activity, what exactly would they see you doing?
- – What would they see the children doing?

The more detail in which this can be described the better, because it will clarify the observable behaviour associated with the increased level of involvement.

■ Set up an activity where adults work in pairs to play a simple game, e.g. hangman. Prior to the activity give one adult the instruction that they should not under any circumstances in any way communicate with their partner. Allow signs of frustration to develop before ending the activity. Provide opportunity for sharing of feelings about the task and the roles played.
- – Make a collection of phrases an adult might use to appropriately express anger or frustration.
- – Suggest phrases which would be appropriate to use in an early years setting.

OHT 3

■ Language is one vehicle for communication but it gives rise to endless opportunities for misunderstanding. As adults, we accept that sometimes people say things they do not mean or attach different meanings to words and phrases. It is sometimes hard though to remember that children are just learning about the words they are using and that they have learned these words from a variety of people and situations. Within their learning experience they may not have understood the full implications or meanings of the words and phrases they use. What they probably will have picked up is the way in which the words were used and something of the response. For example, shouting 'I want it now!'gets you what you want. Therefore it is worth using the words to see if it works in another situation.
- – Make a collection of phrases a child might use to express anger or frustration.
- – Suggest phrases you could use to respond.
- – Identify the message this gives to the child.
- – Collect ideas of ways you could support further learning about responding to similar situations.
- – Identify what impact the following would have on your response: a child new to the setting, a child whose first language is not English, a child who has language difficulties, a child who has difficulties understanding situations, a child aged 5 with some developmental delay.

■ In order to encourage a consistent approach to support children's social emotional learning, the adults in the setting need to make some conscious decisions. These would include:

3 CONTINUED

– Is it appropriate for children to say sorry after an incident?

– Can more attention be given for appropriate behaviour than inappropriate behaviour in the 'sort-ing out' process?

– In what ways can we ensure that children receive consistent messages about their behaviour?

– Should children always share all the equipment/toys they are using?

– Do all children need to be friends all of the time?

Each of these discussions will raise several points of view which need to be reconciled. The purpose is not for us to convince each other that our view is correct but to find a practical compromise which can be applied by all on a daily basis.

The situation can be depersonalized through the use of scenarios which illustrate each of the situations and allow adults to think in 'professional mode' rather than purely on a personal basis.

■ As a group consider how it feels to be approached by someone who looks:

– angry

– frightened

– excited

– determined.

Collect descriptive words and record these on a flipchart.

OHT 4

■ Considering the elements involved in the learning process (Chapter 2) identify a variety of opportunities in which children could learn about and practise the skills needed for conflict resolution.

OHT 5

■ Plan the steps you will use to introduce a conflict resolution process to the children. Include opportunity for modelling, practice, positive feedback, review of what has been taught, reflection on how it is work-ing with the children, how it will be shared with parents and feedback to children/parents.

OHT 1
Session 3

Communication skills

The communication skills we develop involve the use of our:

■ facial expression

■ tone of voice

■ body language

■ words

To ensure a consistent message we need to make sure that all these elements are giving the same message.

85–95 per cent of communication is non-verbal, words only count for about 10 per cent of the message.

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OHT 2
Session 3

The three stages of an interaction

Beginning

- A way of getting into the interaction

Middle

- Keep the interaction going

End

- A way of ending the interaction and moving on

What phrases might commonly be used for each of these stages?

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OHT 3
Session 3

How do you feel about conflict?

■ Anxious

■ Frightened

■ Excited

■ Angry

■ Determined

What effect does this initial reaction have on the way you physically approach a conflict situation?

What messages would your body language, tone of voice, facial expression and words be giving?

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OHT 4
Session 3

Skills for conflict resolution

- Listening

- Communicating clearly our own needs and wishes

- Understanding a situation

- Ability to appreciate another's view

- Co-operation

- Ability to communicate respect

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OHT 5
Session 3

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Possible conflict resolution process

1 Tell me what has happened:

    (a) take turns

    (b) listen to each other

2 This is what I think you have said:

    (a) Is that right?

    (b) How can we sort it out?

    (c) What could we do differently next time?

    (d) What will we do now?

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