



The Middle Years: Conflict Management

Making friends, getting along with others, and peacefully resolving conflicts are essential social skills for your children to learn and practice during their elementary and middle school years. These skills are especially important during these years, as children gradually become more concerned about being accepted by other children their age.

Research suggests that there is a relationship between aggression and being rejected by others. The difficulty is that it is hard to know what comes first. Does the aggressive behavior prevent the development of good friendships, or does rejection by other children make a child feel hostile and aggressive? Regardless of what comes first, if your child does not learn how to make and keep good friends, the cycle of rejection and hostility is likely to continue. This cycle can contribute to violent behavior or to becoming a victim of violence.

As parents, you and your family play a critical role in fostering skills that encourage appropriate ways to handle conflict without becoming aggressive. Your child learns by watching you, his brothers and sisters, and other relatives. You can help by:

- *Listening to your child.* Take time to encourage your child to use words and to explain what he or she needs, or what the most important issue is, while you actively listen.
- *Using negotiation and compromise.* Once you understand your child's concern, work with your child to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to you and to your child.
- *Giving reasons for rules.* Sometimes a rule is not negotiable, but you can clearly state the reason for the rule as often as necessary, so that your child understands and is more likely to respect the boundaries that you have decided on.
- *Refraining from physical discipline.* Hitting, slapping, and spanking may lead to further aggressive behavior. Parents may want to consider choosing less physical options, such as redirection, negotiation, or an age-appropriate amount of time-out.

Research in schools shows that students and teachers who are trained in conflict management and mediation are more likely to work together for joint goals and have a safe school environment. Individual children benefit, too. Positive outcomes for students who learn how to resolve conflicts without aggression include higher self-esteem, better mental health, and *resilience*, or the ability to overcome and thrive in difficult circumstances.

The information contained in this summary is taken from the Middle Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).

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