

Conflict, It's a Part of Life

“But Mom, he hit me first! But Dad, it's my turn! But, that's not fair!”

Sound familiar? It should. All families deal with conflict. The question is not *whether* we'll deal with conflict but *how* we'll deal with conflict. Perhaps the first thing we need to do is accept the fact that conflict is inevitable, it's part of life and although we can try to prevent some conflicts, we can never eliminate conflict from life. So, if you think you as a parent are focusing all your energy on trying to eliminate fights, arguments and disagreements from your family life, you might want to think again. That energy might be better spent in helping your children learn to deal with the inevitable conflicts in a peaceful, constructive way. From our Assets survey, we know that only 56% of girls and 40% of boys in middle and high school report that they try to resolve conflicts peacefully. Dealing with the inevitable conflicts of life can help children learn and grow but we have to teach them how. So where can we begin?

An Ounce of Prevention

Conflict is inevitable, but there are some things we can do to lessen the conflicts. Children and adults who are tired or hungry or who feel constantly rushed and stressed are apt to get into more conflicts and have less energy to settle them constructively. Think about when your children argue or fight the most. Is there something you can change in their environment or routine that would make a difference? Would a snack help? Fewer activities? Earlier bed time? A hug?

Change Your Behavior

Sometimes the fastest way to change your child's behavior is to change your own. Think about what you're doing now – how do you handle conflict at home, at work? What are your strategies? Do they work? Example is still the best teacher!

- Do you think every disagreement has to have a winner and a loser? It may be helpful to think about conflict as a problem that needs to be solved, not a competition with winners and losers
- Do you have a clear rule about hitting with clear consequences that are consistently applied? Hitting (kicking, biting etc) is never an acceptable way to solve a conflict and parents need to make that very clear.
- When you hear your children yelling at each other do you ask them “Why are you fighting?” “What's going on here?” Do you really want to know? The answers to those questions are usually not helpful and next thing you know you're right in the middle of the fight! Don't get sucked in to their disagreement.
- When you feel yourself charging across the room and your voice is getting louder and louder, unless there is a really dangerous situation –STOP and take a deep breath. Emotions are contagious – the angrier you become, the angrier they'll become. Besides, it's hard to think clearly when your brain is in the flight or fight mode. Give yourself some time. Give **them** the tools. Let **them** work on a solution. Don't step in too fast!

Give Your Children Some Tools

There are lots of practical strategies and tools that you can teach your children. Here are a few.

- **Perspective Taking** helps children learn to see things from another person's vantage point. If your children are fighting, instead of taking on the role of judge and jury (trust me, you'll always be wrong) ask them to tell you what happened **BUT** from the **other child's** perspective. This means they will have to talk to each other and understand how thing appeared from their friend's or sibling's point of view. If the two children are really angry, they'll need to cool off before they do this. Which brings us to:
- **Time Out!** Time out is a great strategy for dealing with conflict, but only if it is seen as a strategy and **not a punishment**. As adults, most of us have learned that it is often wiser to take a few minutes to cool down before trying to settle a conflict and children need to learn this strategy too. Help your children understand that it's hard to think clearly when you are very angry or very hurt or very sad and we have to think clearly when we're trying to solve problems. A little time can work wonders!

- **Learning to Share** is a life long issue and it is hard for all of us to share our favorite things, our time and our communal “stuff”. Again, we want to help our children learn how to solve these problems themselves, so if there’s a fight about the TV or the computer, let the children come up with a plan that works. Until they do, the TV or the computer is off. Maybe they’ll decide to do something else!
- **XYZ** is a simple way Haim Ginot, author of [Between Parent and Child](#), suggests for teaching children how to stick to the conflict *issue* and not get sidetracked by going after the *person*. It also helps children (and adults) get clear about what the problem actually is. Help your child learn to say: “When you do or say **X**, I feel **Y**, so I’d rather you’d do or say **Z**.”

It’s a new year and we can all begin again. What a gift, beginning again! And it’s in the beginning again each day that we show our children how much we love them and care about them. Sometimes, we all think if we just did it “right” then the children would get it and we wouldn’t have to keep on helping with all this, but actually there is no perfect answer or magic bullet. It’s a long way to “grown-up” and as we all know, even when you get there, you have to keep on trying.

The Assets Approach is a researched-based plan that is guiding our whole community in making sure ALL our children have what they need to become healthy, caring, responsible adults. After decades of research, the Search Institute (www.search-institute.org) has named 40 positive experiences, opportunities, relationship, attitudes, skills and values that have a powerful, positive impact on young people. Research shows that these 40 “assets” help children and teens make smart choices and grow-up with the skills they need to be strong, caring resilient adults. Together, the 40 assets provide a strong foundation on which children can build their lives.

For more information about the practical “real-life” application of the Assets Framework, please contact: Mary Ann Moran, Assets Liaison at mmoran@co.arlington.va.us or (703) 228-1671.