Creating Environments for Peaceful Problem Solving
Sandra Lamm, Judith G. Groulx, Cindy Hansen, Mary Martin Patton, and Anna Jimenez Slaton

“I want that!” demands Jordan. “No-o-o!” protests Marisha. “I had it first!”
“You’re a baby!”
Marisha hunches over the puzzle and tells Jordan, “You can't play! Go away! You are not my friend.” A moment later, she yells, “Teacher, he hit me with the block!”

You may have heard similar outbursts by children in your own classroom. For many early childhood teachers, angry voices are heard all too often. They are the voices of children who feel agitated, upset, and out of control.

When children focus on protecting themselves and surviving conflicts, they miss out on the joys and opportunities the early childhood program has to offer. Without the ability to solve problems in their interactions with others, children are not able to peacefully engage in play and learning.

What can teachers do? For some, the tool kit of responses may include pleading (“Can we please all take turns?”), directing (“Give that back! He had it first”), or punishing (“You go to time-out!”). While these responses may curb problem behavior for the moment, they do not bring about the long-term changes that move children toward social competence. This article highlights a program to help early childhood teachers establish and maintain more peaceful classroom environments.

**Connect4Success works**
The First Texas Council of Camp Fire USA has been a leader in providing training for teachers and caregivers in the Fort Worth area for many years. In 2001 the organization conducted a survey of teachers to learn more about growing concerns regarding aggressive and angry children in

Illustration © Adjoa Burrowes.
their care. The teachers reported a dramatic rise in antagonistic behaviors among younger and younger children and acknowledged that they felt unprepared to respond appropriately to these behaviors. "All I do all day long is break up fights," said one frustrated teacher of three- and four-year-olds. "I've had a lot of training, but nothing I try seems to help."

In consultation with national and local experts, three of the First Texas Council staff (authors Lamm, Hansen, and Slaton) developed the Connect4Success (C4S) curriculum to support teachers and directors in setting up classroom environments that facilitate peaceful problem solving. In 2003 the first of six-month training sessions began and about 30 early childhood programs participated. The results are remarkable, and the initiative is ongoing and expanding.

The numeral 4 in Connect4Success refers to the key players in the joint effort: children, teachers, families, and the wider community. The intensive training program focuses on child development theory as well as practical classroom strategies. Participants learn of the impact of media on young children and how to limit the negative effects of TV overexposure. They discover ways to establish an inclusive program that is sensitive to children with varying abilities and from different backgrounds and cultures.

The intensive training includes follow-up support for family involvement and public awareness activities. Participants explore ways of improving communication and collaboration between home and the early childhood program in relation to the topics covered over the six months.

C4S works. All the participating classrooms serving children from two through five years in half- and full-day nonprofit, for-profit, and faith-based programs for low- and middle-income families have experienced significant prosocial progress. According to teacher reports and observations by external evaluators (authors Groulx and Patton), the incidence of challenging behaviors is reduced by more than 40 percent when the C4S strategies are applied. Crying and tattling decrease, and children peacefully resolve conflicts with adult guidance rather than intervention. Teachers report they can concentrate on planning for children's growth and success rather than continuously responding to misbehavior and intervening to resolve disagreements between children.

When classroom materials and toys are age appropriate, children are less likely to be bored or frustrated.

**Implementing C4S basics into your program**

Three basic C4S strategies can improve interactions in any classroom:

1. Make sure the environment supports positive interactions.
2. Help children recognize and respond to their feelings.
3. Teach children conflict resolution skills.

Home-school collaboration is woven into each aspect of C4S. When teachers and families work closely together, using similar strategies at home and in the classroom, they find that children's skills develop even faster.

**1. Create a positive environment**

The classroom environment can exacerbate or minimize behavior problems. Consider the environment in your classroom. For example, if all of the furniture is pushed against the walls, the wide-open space may invite children to run and roughhouse. Simple physical changes—such as rearranging the furniture to create learning centers—can help.

When classroom materials and toys are age appropriate, children are less likely to be bored or frustrated. They will find it easier to share and take turns when favorite toys are easily accessible and there are duplicates of the most popular items. A flexible schedule, with a balance of activities and adequate time for transitions, keeps children positively engaged instead of waiting or standing in line—always a recipe for conflict.

The environment also should reflect a reciprocal relationship between teachers and families. Welcome parents into the classroom with places to sit and read or talk with their children. Let them see what their children do in the classroom through displays and posted information. Bring
When children forget to follow a safety rule, remind them of the rule and help them understand why it is necessary.

Aspects of children’s homes into the classroom with family photos or special items that comfort a child or share a family’s culture and language.

Ensuring safety. Children need to know they are free from harm in their early childhood setting and that teachers are people they can trust. Start by creating safe play and learning environments, both indoors and out. Diane Levin (2003) recommends teaching the following message to every child:

I am safe here:

1. My body is safe,
2. My feelings are safe,
3. My thoughts, ideas, and words are safe, and
4. My work is safe. (p. 32)

When children forget to follow a safety rule, such as walking when indoors, remind them of the rule and help them understand why it is necessary. Soon, the children will begin to use safety rules to guide their own behavior. You might overhear, for example, “Let’s put a sign on the block structure to keep our work safe. Then no one will knock it down.” Invite children to contribute more specific rules related to safety. For example, they might think of “Walking inside Prevents Injuries.”

Share safety rules with families, explaining how you use them in the program and discussing ways they might use rules at home. Encourage them to share the ways they help their children feel safe at home, and incorporate some of their techniques into the program.

Creating a peace place. One of the most effective additions to the environment is a designated “peace place,” a quiet, out-of-the-way spot where children can choose to go to work out their problems. Stocked with materials that help children reflect and problem solve independently, this space creates a refuge for calming down and resolving conflicts (Kreidler & Whittall 1999).

Furnish the peace place with comfortable pillows and rugs, playdough to pound, a pinwheel to blow, a mirror for examining facial expressions, puppets for acting out conflict scenarios, books on friendship and emotions, and music for relaxing. (Also see “Materials for the Classroom and the Peace Place.”) Ask children what items they’d like to include, and discuss what they might prefer to call the special area.

Introduce the peace place by talking with children about how to use the area and acting out potential scenarios (using “The Six-Step Approach to Problem Solving” described on p. 27). It is important to remember that the peace place is not a time-out area. It is not a place used as punishment but rather serves as a designated place for peacemaking to occur. Another important distinction from time-out is that children are not sent to the peace place; they choose to go there when they need to. Gartrell describes this kind of strategy as “self-removal” (2002, 40).

Encourage children to use the peace place whenever a conflict arises. Ask those involved in the conflict if they would like to go there to work out their problem, and offer to go with them. Coach the children toward problem resolution, making sure that each child feels safe and satisfied with the solution. Soon, children will recognize when and how to use the peace place to talk things out, many times without adult assistance.

Families often adapt the peace place concept for use in their homes. Be sure to show parents the special space in the classroom and encourage the children to explain to their parents what the peace place is and how they use it. Prepare a handout or a newsletter article with a photo of the classroom peace place and suggestions for setting up a similar place at home.

Remind families that at home, as in the classroom, the best peace spaces are developed with children’s input. Parents will be impressed with their children’s contributions. One four-year-old created a home peace place on the lowest step of the staircase, and the whole family sometimes gathers there to resolve a conflict. A father, who heard his son say to his friend, “We have a problem—let’s go to the peace place and talk it out,” was so amazed by
Materials for the Classroom and the Peace Place

**Unbreakable mirror.** A mirror provides a concrete way for children to identify, label, and start to understand feelings—both their own and those of others. Children can see in a mirror what their faces look like at times when they are experiencing different emotions. By identifying and labeling feelings, they learn to negotiate conflict and regulate powerful emotion.

**Multicultural finger and hand puppets.** Puppets inspire children to take on and play roles. Multicultural puppets can be purchased, but simple, effective ones can be made, including an array of skin tones, with multicolored paper and wooden craft sticks. The children can match their skin tones to the puppets, helping them begin to become aware of human likenesses and differences. Discussions of *same* and *different* are a springboard to a more in-depth antibias curriculum, building an understanding of the world and a tolerance for different ideas and thoughts. With puppets to represent them and to speak and act for them, children often are more able to express feelings and work through conflicts.

**Playdough and other sensory materials.** Materials children can touch and feel invite them to express their emotions. They are especially helpful for children who are unskilled at or uncomfortable with talking about feelings. Sensory experiences can be very soothing to children who are upset. Playdough, for example, and tools for rolling, pounding, and cutting it, are very useful in the peace place.

**Rainstick.** Rainsticks, both traditional instruments and classroom-fabricated versions (instructions are readily available online), produce a soothing sound, much like rainfall. As the stick is turned end to end, there is a gentle fall of seeds or beads inside, capable of soothing a child trying to calm a strong emotion. Children are intrigued not only by the sound but also by its mysterious source. Rainsticks are especially useful in the peace place.

**CD player or tape player and soothing music.** Music has the ability to soothe. Let children play their favorites from a collection of classical and soft music to calm down and reflect. Children can use the tape or CD player to listen to recorded books that deal with feelings and other topics. Have the books nearby so children can follow the words and illustrations. See “Selected Prosocial Books for Children.”

**Feelings poster.** A feelings poster, like a mirror, provides a concrete way to show how feelings *look* and encourages the use of words to name and express emotions. Posters are available commercially or easily made, with simple, labeled faces expressing a wide range of emotions. Posters with only a few emotions are usually best for children under three. The poster might also be used to create a classroom chart, recording each child’s chosen feeling at the beginning of each day. Tallying up the results at the end of the week integrates math and social concepts.

**Child-size soft chairs or pillows.** Classrooms have many hard surfaces such as tiled floors and wooden or plastic chairs and tables. Areas with soft chairs or big pillows are needed to soothe children who are upset and others who just want to curl up for some alone time or share a book with an adult or another child. The peace place should especially have soft materials.

---

the children’s problem-solving skills that he is considering starting a peace place for his employees.

**Organizing family clubs.** Some C4S programs adopted the Camp Fire concept of Community Family Clubs. These monthly club meetings often included a meal shared by adults and children, time set aside for social support among families and staff, and a review of concepts and strategies the early childhood staff were learning in the training program. Parents reported that they appreciated hearing that other families shared their concerns and challenges. Teachers and parents both found the clubs a helpful way to improve consistency between home and the child care setting. Teachers reported that the consistency strengthened their relationships with the families. Families were more comfortable offering their time and ideas to the program in other ways after participating in the family club meetings.

---

2. **Recognize feelings**

Young children live in the moment and are easily consumed by powerful feelings. Adults can help them feel more secure by accepting their feelings and helping them deal with them in safe and productive ways (Kreidler & Whittall 1999). To effectively deal with emotions, children need to be able to recognize and name their feelings and find appropriate ways to express them. This process helps them learn self-control. We adults can model this process by talking about and labeling our own feelings.

Remind families that at home, as in the classroom, the best peace spaces are developed with children’s input.
Selected Prosocial Books for Children


This book shows children many alternatives to hitting and other types of hurting behavior. The whimsical illustrations explore the concept of friendship, ways of resolving conflicts, and positive uses for hands. Other books in the series include Words Are Not for Hurting, Teeth Are Not for Biting, and Feet Are Not for Kicking.


This book recounts Sophie’s journey through confrontation and seething anger to eventual calm. The story and the dramatic illustrations help children identify their own ways of dealing with anger. The author approaches strong emotions with acceptance and respect.


This book spans many different emotions (younger children may not be able to distinguish all of them). Cleverly color-coded moods (“anger” in reds, “bored” in muted tones) invite children to consider their own emotions and the colors they might choose to represent them.


The author acknowledges human mood swings and lets children know it is okay to feel the way they do.


This is the story of a boy who is upset at the end of a very bad day. His mother offers a safe alternative for dealing with his strong emotions by allowing him to yell in a pot of water. The story validates feelings and demonstrates appropriate ways of expressing those feelings.


This book is about a cute, pushy pig who always insists on being first. He learns the lesson that being first is not always best. The book lends itself well to dramatic play and exploring the lessons learned.


This book offers children a good problem-solving scenario. The beautiful and proud rainbow fish resolves a sharing squabble in a way that leads to friendship among the creatures.

Young children are very concrete in their thinking and may find it difficult to understand feelings because they are abstract. We can help children recognize and understand feelings by teaching them to “read” faces. Instead of asking a child how she feels, hand her a mirror and help her to describe what her face looks like. For instance, “Look at your tears. Your face is sad.” Or, “Show me what your face looks like when you are happy. See that big smile?” This allows the child to connect feelings and behavior. Similarly, ask children to describe how others’ faces look, so they can begin to read another person’s feelings. “Look at KeShawn’s face. What do you see? How do you think he is feeling?”

Ask children to describe how others’ faces look, so they can begin to read another person’s feelings.

Reading books like Hands Are Not for Hitting (see “Selected Prosocial Books for Children”) and using puppets for role play are nontreating avenues for discussing and exploring feelings and considering how others may feel. Teachers using the C4S methods found that a classroom feelings chart, on which children recorded their feelings each morning, was particularly effective (see “Materials for the Classroom and the Peace Place,” p. 25). They also used picture cards of faces with different emotions labeled, feelings puppets, or a feelings jar, lotto, or sorting game. Early Childhood Adventures in Peacemaking (Kreidler & Whittall 1999) features many simple games and activities.

Families enjoyed these activities at home and were often impressed with how grown-up their young children sounded when discussing their feelings. A popular activity at monthly family club meetings was making puppets with “feelings faces” glued to wooden craft sticks. Both adults and children initially
seemed to find it easier to have the puppets talk about their feelings than to talk about their own feelings.

3. Learn to resolve conflicts peacefully

"The Six-Step Approach to Problem Solving" (below) offers teachers and children simple techniques to calm down and work out conflicts. The approach is a simplified version of Diane Levin's (2003) summary of problem solving and conflict resolution. The steps are worded so that children can easily remember them (with key points highlighted in bold). Post the steps in the peace place to help children learn and remember to use them.

Recall the two children arguing at the beginning of this article? Here's how any teacher hearing "I want that!" and "No-o-o! I had it first!" might use the six-step approach to resolve the conflict:

1. Help the children state the problem. Move calmly to the site of the dispute and acknowledge the children's feelings. ("I can see you are mad about this.") Next, ask each child in turn to describe what is happening. This is a good time to refer back to the safety rule, reminding children that everyone's feelings, thoughts, and bodies need to be safe. Restate the problem after both children have spoken. ("So you both want to work on the puzzle, is that right?")

2. Help the children brainstorm ideas that might solve the problem. ("How could you solve this problem?") Some ideas will be better than others, but remember: this step is about generating ideas, not evaluating them. Let the children continue until they run out of new ideas. If they have no ideas, you may need to prime the pump with a suggestion or two. ("Could you work on the puzzle together?"

"Could you let him know when you are finished with the puzzle so that he can have a turn?")

3. Discuss how the ideas might work. Ask the children to explain what they would do to carry out the ideas they have generated. If they are new at using the problem-solving process, you may need to coach them a bit by describing scenarios and solutions that might arise. For instance, "What if you get stuck finishing the puzzle? Will it be OK for him to ask if you need help?" Always check with each child to see if a solution might work. By this point in the process, children usually are calm and beginning to enjoy playing "what if?"

4. Have the children agree on a workable idea. Make sure each child agrees that the idea can work. Talk with the children about how they will try it out and how they will report back. For example, "So your plan is that you will work on the puzzle first, and then you will tell Raven when you are finished?"

5. Help the children try out their idea. ("Raven, what will you do while she is working on the puzzle?") Be aware that many ideas are never fully implemented. Quite often the children quickly forget the squabble and get interested in other things. (Raven may be fully engrossed in another activity by the time the puzzle is free.)

6. Check back with the children to see how their idea worked. Whether or not the idea was fully implemented, appreciate the effort and techniques used. ("Marisha, you came up with a good idea about using the puzzle. Did that work out OK for you and Raven?" "Raven, you made sure that Marisha had a chance to talk about her ideas. Maybe next time you have a disagreement, you two can talk it out.")

Share the six-step approach with families. "F.R.I.E.N.D. Steps and Sample Phrases for Supporting Children in Resolving Conflicts" (see p. 23), an easy-to-remember version

---

Young Children • November 2006

The Six-Step Approach to Problem Solving

1. Help the children state the problem.
2. Help them brainstorm ideas that might solve the problem.
3. Discuss how the ideas might work.
4. Have the children agree on one workable idea.
5. Try out the idea.
6. Review the idea to see how it worked.

F.R.I.E.N.D. Steps and Sample Phrases for Supporting Children in Resolving Conflicts

1. **Face-to-face.** Place yourself between children and get on their eye level. Speak calmly and respond in a gentle manner.

2. **Recognition.** “You look very angry.”

3. **Inquire.** “I want each of you to tell me what happened.”

4. **Echo.** “John, you are saying that Chris took the tricycle away from you.” “Chris, you are saying that John doesn’t want to share the trike with you.”

5. **Negotiate.** “John wants to let you ride the tricycle for 10 minutes, and then he can ride it for 10 minutes.”

6. **Down time.** “Great! You solved the problem.” Follow up to make sure the problem has been solved.


Enjoy a peace-filled classroom

The before-and-after social environments in the Connect4Success classrooms differ dramatically. Where there had been chaos, now there is calm. Children routinely tell their teachers and parents they are going to go to the peace place to work out a problem.

Implementing these techniques requires a leap of faith. You may think, That’s fine for that teacher, but it will never work with the children in my classroom. Yes, some children’s behavior requires more involved intervention, but for most children, the Connect4Success strategies make a real difference. Take the leap. Enjoy the peace!

References


This article presents some of C4S’s most practical and effective techniques for educators to use every day in their early childhood classrooms. More information is available online at www.firsttexascampfire.org/C4SHome.htm.

---

Emotional Competence: Too Important to Be Left to Chance

The need for a renewed attention to emotions and emotional competence has never been greater. If children are to be, as the first National Education Goal says, “ready to learn” (National Education Goals Panel, 1997), they must have the underlying security and emotional foundations for that learning, and for the later social and emotional tasks necessary for success and satisfaction in life. Yet “few school reform movements have paid much attention to the social and emotional components in reforming schools” (Bowman, 1999, p. 285), even when family, community, and political violence and trauma place even more children at risk for emotional difficulties.

Fortunately, 20 years of research provide convincing evidence of the importance of emotions in early development and learning—and about the role that adults and affective environments play in supporting emotional competence. . . . An underlying message of all this research is that emotional development is too important to be left to chance.

References

