

Helping Children Learn to Get Along



“Hey, I had that first!” “Tony hit me!” Do children’s quarrels leave you frazzled? Most teachers and parents feel that they must step in to keep children from hurting each other or being unfair. Getting along with others is a skill that can be learned. Be patient as you teach conflict resolution skills that help children form friendships and work successfully with others. Model the kind and empathetic behavior you want the children to practice.

Find out why the children are struggling to play together.

Most children’s conflicts serve some purpose. One child may be trying to get adult attention. Another may be trying to get a friend or sibling to interact with them. A child may be acting out feelings they don’t have the words to express.

Identify the problem.

Ask each child what they think the problem is. Don’t spend time on assigning blame. Help those involved put their conflict into words: “It looks like Sara wants the truck right now, and so does Josh. Is that right?”

Help them cool off.

Without taking sides, make sure that all the children involved are calm enough to talk. You can tell them, “When you feel less upset, it will be time to solve the problem.” Help them find ways to calm themselves, such as deep breathing and giving yourself a big hug. Remind them of rules such as “No hitting.”

Generate alternatives.

Ask the children, “What can you do so you could both be happy?” You can record their ideas, but let them do the thinking. Usually, at least one child will make a suggestion. If the children can’t think of any ideas, consider throwing in a really silly one to get them started.

Evaluate alternatives and choose a plan.

Work on empathy and fairness. Ask the children to evaluate different strategies. For example, “Josh, can Sara play with the truck first, while you play with the cement mixer? We can set a timer for 5 minutes, and then you can trade toys. Does this seem fair to you?” The children can decide which action to take.

Follow up and reinforce positive behavior.

Decide when you will check with the children to see if the plan is working. Acknowledge acts of kindness and respect with a smile or a positive comment.

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