FLY FIVE®

The Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum

RESOLVING DIFFERENCES

When our students encounter a conflict, they're going to experience many emotions. They may feel sad or angry, frustrated or scared. The same is true for adults— conflicts are not typically the most pleasant experiences. But as difficult as conflicts can be, they present an opportunity for both individual and team growth. Developing 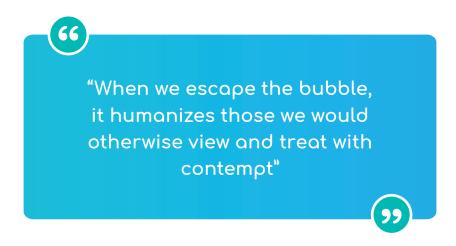conflict resolution strategies supports our ability to cooperate, but it also fosters many other SEL skills, including perspective-taking, showing respect for other people's ideas and opinions, and adhering to social expectations while navigating a conflict. Teaching students how to resolve differences with respect and honesty is an essential facet of their social and emotional education.

Education that focuses on conflict resolution offers students valuable problem-solving strategies, effective listening and communication tactics, and the ability to think critically and creatively (Hart, n.d), all of which are essential life skills. Research suggests that early adolescents who are able to use cooperative strategies, rather than aggressive tactics, for resolving differences tend to engage in fewer risk behaviors, such as substance abuse or violence-related behaviors; engagement in these risk-behaviors is correlated with many negative emotional and physical outcomes (LaRusso & Selman, 2011). Conflict resolution, including understanding one's conflict resolution style, is essential to cooperating in a productive way (Buchs & Butera, 2015). Engaging well with conflict allows us to better identify and solve problems, keep morale up and learning going, and experience personal growth and insight (Boyle, 2017).

Conflicts can arise from a wide variety of sources: confusion about intent/motivation, unclear delineation of roles within a group, personal differences, competition, differences of opinion or expectation, among many others (Levi, 2001). As students grow, they may act out their emotions through behaviors that lead to conflict, such as gossip, teasing, or aggression (Hart, n.d.). Legitimate conflicts within a group involve differences of opinions, values, perspectives, and expectations surrounding the outcome of the project. These conflicts can lead to stronger bonds among those involved in the conflict, foster open debate and deepen learning, and stimulate creativity. Legitimate conflicts can be a source of healthy productivity, whereas conflicts over power, personality, or superiority tend to be unhealthy and unproductive. The extent to which a conflict is either healthy or unhealthy depends largely on the parties' willingness to participate in productive conflict resolution strategies (Levi, 2001).

As you teach your students about resolving differences (and practice your own conflict resolution strategies), draw the distinction between healthy and unhealthy conflict. Particularly now, as we are spending more time online, scrolling our feeds which can keep us in a "bubble" of similar beliefs, it can be easy for students to conflate an opposing opinion with an all-out conflict. Show them how engaging with differences of opinion can challenge us to deepen our own understanding of a situation or controversy and allow us to grow intellectually, emotionally, and personally. As Arthur Brooks, author of Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt, said, "When we escape the bubble, it humanizes those we would otherwise view and treat with contempt" (Duncan, 2019). Make it a priority to highlight different perspectives in the classroom and have students think through the difference between a conflict and an opposing school of thought.

> "When we escape the bubble, it humanizes those we would otherwise view and treat with contempt"

Below are conflict resolution techniques you can implement in your classroom:

- **Create a climate conducive to resolving conflicts.** In schools with a "survival based climate," solving conflicts with aggression and retaliation is common; resolving conflict involves insulating oneself from harm, often in negative ways. In schools with a "respect based climate," students focus on listening and perspective taking, and solving conflicts with aggression is relatively rare. Educators can create a "respect based climate" by intervening in conflicts early, listening to all sides, and offering counseling and services where necessary (LaRusso & Selman, 2011).

- **Practice mindfulness.** Emotions cannot be separated from their role in a conflict, and one's ability to regulate their emotions is crucial for using learned conflict resolution techniques in the moment (Fountain, 2019). Implementing a mindfulness practice can help students build self-awareness and remain present in the moment. When students can remain present, they can use conflict resolution strategies while constructively managing the negative emotions conflict can cause.

Mindfulness can be particularly useful in situations where the conflict is really two people with differing points of view, as it helps us manage the big emotions that often accompany those difficult conversations. When students are better able to regulate their emotions and view a conflict objectively, they are better able to solve it on their own. Utilize the Fly Five mindfulness principles to help with mindfulness for conflict resolution:

- **In the Moment**, which helps students remain present and able to respond to what is actually happening, rather than responding to their emotions.
- **Suspend Judgment**, which encourages students to look at a circumstance with curiosity, rather than judging it, and make an intentional decision about how to act.
- **Reality Check**, which reminds students that, even if something is contentious or unpleasant, they still must deal with it in the best way they can.

In the Moment	Suspend Judgment	Reality Check

- **Model positive conflict resolution strategies.** When students do not see teachers practicing the same respectful behavior and positive communication expected of students themselves, they are less likely to trust their teachers' intentions and more likely to show cynicism toward the viability of productive conflict resolution strategies (LaRusso & Selman, 2011). When working through conflicts in the classroom, use "I statements," such as "I feel frustrated when the lesson I planned is cut short." Be sure to listen to students without judgment or interruption. When they see their teachers practicing what they preach, students will be more likely to do the same.

- **Address the conflict head on.** While avoiding a conflict may be easy in the moment, avoidance allows conflicts to grow. When conflicts grow, their consequences grow as well— a small disagreement can morph into trust issues and personal resentments. Show students that they are safe to bring up conflicts by establishing trust and maintaining open communication (Levi, 2001). Remind students that solving conflicts, either independently or with help, is important for building strong relationships and cooperating well with others.

- **Ensure all parties involved feel equally valued and heard.** Studies suggest that, in groups where individuals feel that they are equal parts of a collective, cooperation tends to be higher and conflict avoidance happens less (Boroş et al., 2010). When students are working together, be sure each role is clearly defined and all group members understand the value of each role. As students express their opinions in the classroom, highlight the benefits of hearing all different sorts of perspectives. Encourage students to ask their classmates to tell them more about their beliefs, and be sure that no one's opinion is valued more than another's.

Conflict is often unpleasant. Sometimes it may last longer or prove to be more emotional than we would like. But in the end, when we leverage the tools we have to engage with conflict respectfully and constructively, we can strengthen our relationships. Conflict allows us to deepen our understanding of ourselves and others. Especially now, when we may be dealing with conflicts caused by confinement, loneliness, or unforeseen stressors due to the pandemic, using positive communication and conflict resolution strategies will provide exponential benefit to our students, our families, and ourselves. The next time you or your students are facing a conflict, take a deep breath and trust that you have the skills to resolve it.

References

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