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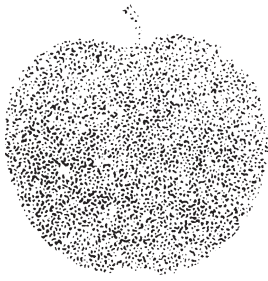
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Creative Conflict Resolution

**More Than 200 Activities for Keeping
Peace in the Classroom**

William J. Kreidler



To my mother and father,
and my good friends at
the Beacon Hill Friends Meeting

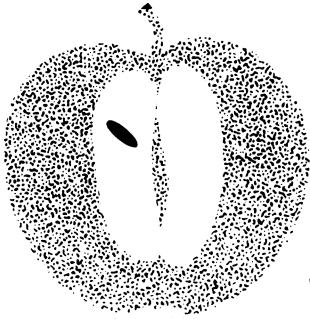
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Chapter 1

Understanding Conflict

Read! And prepare for the coming conflict.

—“Mother” Mary Jones

“Andrew, why did you hit him?”

“He hit me first.”

“He says you hit him first.”

“I didn’t. He hit me first.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. Why did you hit him?”

“I’ll fight. I won’t run away. I’ll fight.”

“And that’s why you hit him?”

“He hit me first.”

How many times have you had that kind of conversation? I’ve had it more times than I care to remember. I was on one side as a child, on the other as a teacher. It is an age-old dialogue, one that reflects the fact that primarily we are taught three ways to deal with conflict situations. They are to:

1. respond aggressively, i.e., physically, verbally, or in some other way to beat our opponent
2. appeal to a higher authority or someone stronger to battle for us
3. ignore the situation

Usually we choose the third option when we can't get anyone to help us and haven't the energy to slug it out, or are afraid we might lose.

We meet with conflict every day, in every way, shape, and form. It is a powerful and pervasive phenomenon. But knowing that doesn't help teachers very much. What does conflict mean to you? Try making a quick list. What are some of the associations, images, and memories that the term *classroom conflict* brings to mind?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Perhaps you saw images of bloody noses and black eyes. Or a girl left all alone on the playground because no one will play with her. Or groups of black and white students glaring angrily at each other. Or a classroom in chaos. Were all your associations negative?

Now close your eyes for a moment, and try to imagine a classroom with no conflicts at all. How is it?

- heavenly boring impossible to imagine

What is a common conflict in your classroom? _____

What is the most nightmarish conflict in your classroom? _____

What kind of emotional reaction do you have to these or other classroom conflicts?

- anger fear resignation
- frustration exasperation all of the above
and more
- annoyance tears

By now you may be wondering what the point of all this is. It's simple: if we are to understand conflict better, it helps to examine our own experiences, attitudes, and fears before looking at a larger, more abstract picture. Also, these exercises bring out an important point. If you are like most teachers, you tend to see conflict in exclusively negative terms. But a number of important and positive effects has been attributed to conflict, among them:

1. preventing stagnation
2. stimulating creative problem solving
3. engendering personal, organizational, and societal change
4. contributing to self-assessment and skill testing¹

In other words, without conflict there would be no growth, no learning, no change. Conflict is essential to life.

If you find the idea that conflict is positive hard to swallow, try looking at it this way instead: classroom conflict is either *functional* or *dysfunctional*. Functional conflicts serve a useful purpose. Their results are positive. They may lead to improved classroom relationships, or to more sensible classroom routine, or to better understanding between students. The results of dysfunctional conflicts are negative. They may lead to your having to be more authoritarian, or to some kids feeling victorious while others feel beaten and scapegoated, or to increased violence. In most cases, a given conflict has the potential for being either functional or dysfunctional. What makes it one or the other is not just the conflict itself, but also our response to it.

How Do You Respond to Conflicts?

The following exercises are designed to help you take a closer look at how you respond to classroom conflicts. There are no trick questions and no absolutely right or wrong answers. The purpose of the exercises is not to open your behavior to judgment, but simply to make you more aware of it.

Read the statements below. If a statement describes a response you usually make to classroom conflict, write "3" in the appropriate answer blank below. If it is a response you occasionally make, write "2" in the appropriate blank; and if you rarely or never make that response, write "1."

When there's a classroom conflict, I:

1. tell the kids to knock it off
2. try to make everyone feel at ease
3. help the kids understand each other's point of view
4. separate the kids and keep them away from each other
5. let the principal handle it
6. decide who started it

7. try to find out what the real problem is
8. try to work out a compromise
9. turn it into a joke
10. tell them to stop making such a fuss over nothing
11. make one kid give in and apologize
12. encourage the kids to find alternative solutions
13. help them decide what they can give on
14. try to divert attention from the conflict
15. let the kids fight it out, as long as no one's hurt
16. threaten to send the kids to the principal
17. present the kids some alternatives from which to choose
18. help everyone feel comfortable
19. get everyone busy doing something else
20. tell the kids to settle it on their own time, after school

	I	II	III	IV	V
1	_____	2 _____	3 _____	4 _____	5 _____
6	_____	7 _____	8 _____	9 _____	10 _____
11	_____	12 _____	13 _____	14 _____	15 _____
16	_____	17 _____	18 _____	19 _____	20 _____
Totals	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Now add the numbers in each column. Each column reflects a particular approach and attitude toward classroom conflict. In which column did you score highest? Find the appropriate number below and see if the description corresponds to your perception of your attitudes toward conflict.

- I** *The no-nonsense approach.* I don't give in. I try to be fair and honest with the kids, but they need firm guidance in learning what's acceptable behavior and what isn't.
- II** *The problem-solving approach.* If there's a conflict, there's a problem. Instead of battling the kids, I try to set up a situation in which we can all solve the problem together. This produces creative ideas and stronger relationships.
- III** *The compromising approach.* I listen to the kids and help them listen to each other. Then I help them give a little. We can't all have everything we want. Half a loaf is better than none.
- IV** *The smoothing approach.* I like things to stay calm and peaceful whenever possible. Most of the kids' conflicts are relatively unimportant, so I just direct attention to other things.

V *The ignoring approach.* I point out the limits and let the kids work things out for themselves. It's good for them, and they need to learn the consequences of their behavior. There's not a whole lot you can do about conflict situations anyway.

At one time or another, each of these approaches is appropriate. There are times, for instance, when ignoring the conflict is the best response. There are also times, particularly if a child's safety is at stake, when a very firm, no-nonsense stance is necessary, when the problem-solving approach, say, simply won't work.

It is useful to assess our predominant conflict resolution styles because we tend to get stuck on one or two styles and apply them inappropriately. Our emphasis, however, is not on judging our behavior but rather on increasing our repertoire of peacemaking skills and learning how and when to apply them most effectively. This depends in part on the type of conflict that occurs.

Types of Conflict

In a classroom—and most other situations as well—conflicts are usually of three types: conflicts over resources, conflict of needs, and conflicts of values.

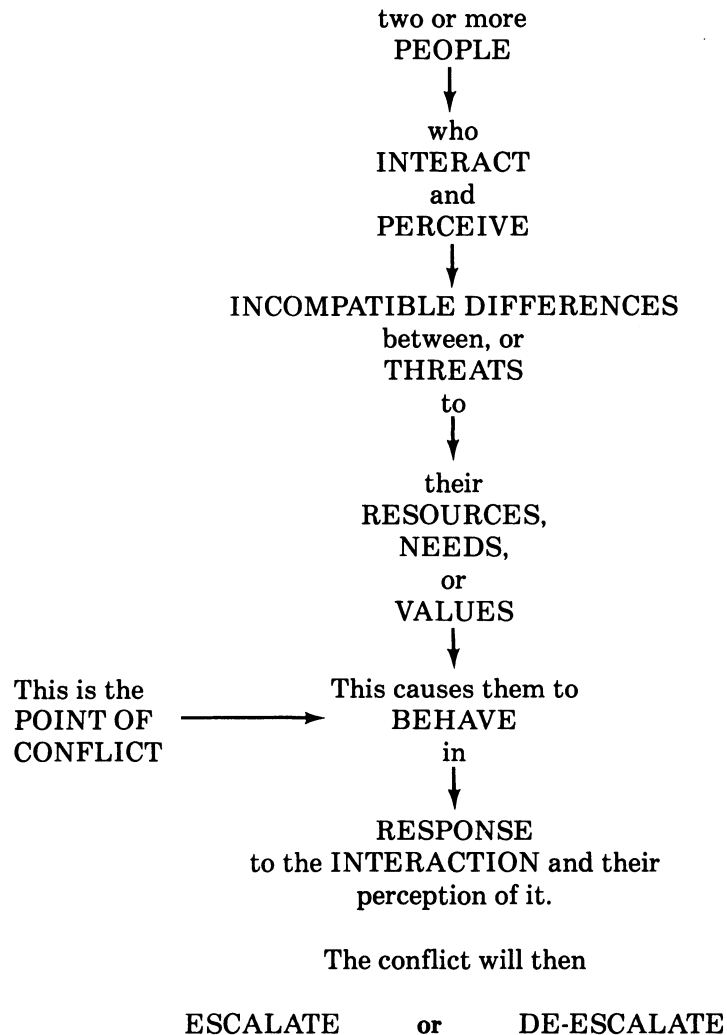
Conflicts over resources occur when two or more people want something that is in short supply, e.g., the ball, the toy trucks, the attention of the teacher, the job of clapping erasers, the friendship of the new kid. These conflicts are often the easiest to resolve.

Children have, of course, many needs, including needs for power, friendship and affiliation, self-esteem, and achievement. Any of these can conflict with the needs of someone else in the class, sometimes overtly, sometimes very subtly. Conflicts of needs are trickier to resolve than conflicts over resources, largely because the reasons for them are less distinct.

When values, those beliefs we hold most dear, clash, the conflict is the most difficult type of all to resolve. When our values are challenged, we often feel that our whole sense of self is threatened, and we cling to our position with a tenacity that other types of conflict don't inspire. Incidentally, conflicts of values are not limited to religious, political, and other beliefs. Goal conflicts are also value conflicts. We all pursue goals; the degree to which we pursue any given goal reflects the value we place on it. Some goals are more important to us than others. When goals conflict, resolution is difficult when both (or all) the participants highly value the conflicting goals.

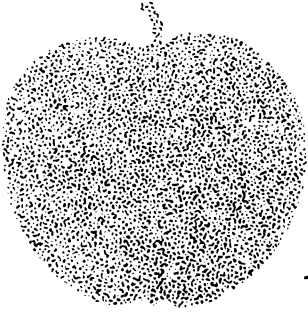
The distinctions between these three types of conflict are sometimes difficult to draw. For example, say that two girls in a ball game are arguing over whose turn it is to pitch. Are they expressing conflicting needs for power, or are they contending for a limited resource, i.e., the right to pitch? Both, probably. Labeling a conflict simply helps you choose a means of resolving it. It's a good idea to start by taking the conflict at face value—in this case, a conflict of resources—and then you can revise your assessment if necessary as you define the problem.

Just as it is useful to be able to label the type of conflict, it also helps to know that most conflicts, large or small, interpersonal or international, follow pretty much the same pattern. To get a good conflict going, you need:²



The conflict will ESCALATE if:

1. there is an increase in exposed emotion, e.g., anger, frustration
2. there is an increase in perceived threat
3. more people get involved, choosing up sides
4. the children were not friends prior to the conflict
5. the children have few peacemaking skills at their disposal



Appendix

Worksheets and Game Cards

Name _____

Fight Form

With whom did you fight? _____

What was the problem? _____

Why did you start fighting? (Give two reasons.) _____

Why did the other person fight with you? _____

Did fighting solve the problem? _____

What are three things you might try if this happens again?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Is there anything you would like to say to the person you fought with? _____

Name

How I Respond to Conflicts

Fill in the appropriate circle for things you always, sometimes, or never do.

	Always	Sometimes	Never
When there's a conflict, I try to:			
1. hit the other person	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. run away	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. get help from another kid	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. talk it out	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. ignore it	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. understand the other point of view	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. make a joke of it	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. get help from a grown-up	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. make the other kid apologize	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. apologize myself	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. find out what the problem is	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. listen to the other kid	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. tell the kid to leave me alone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. say swear words	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. get friends to gang up on the other kid	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>