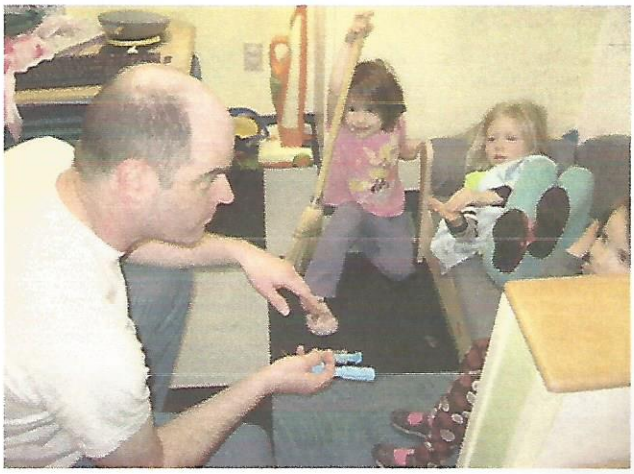
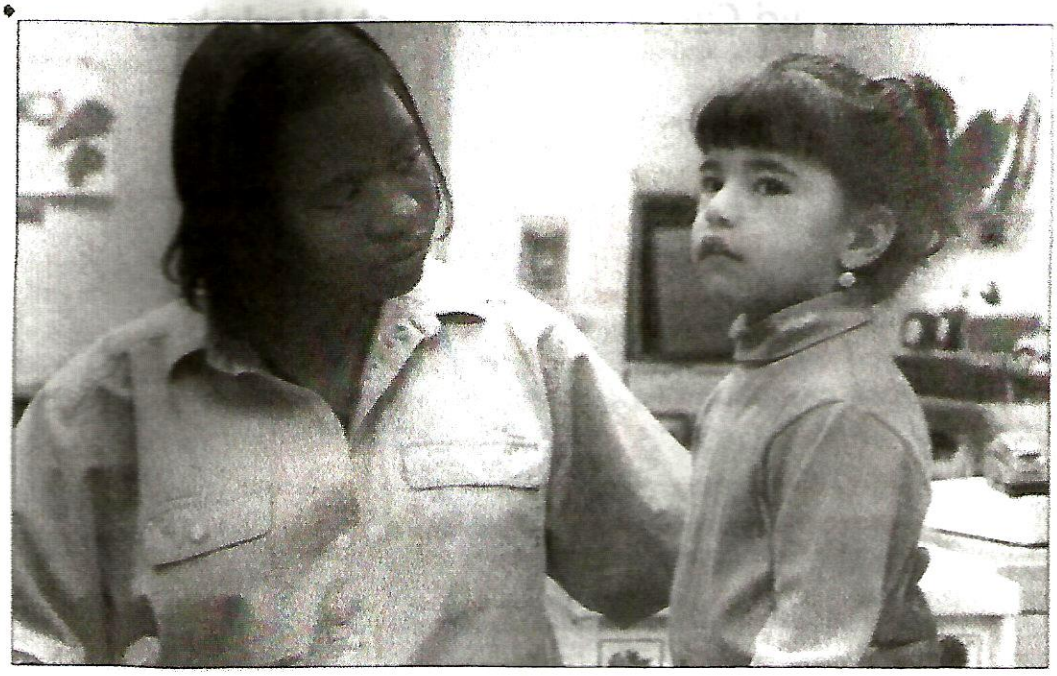
Conflict Resolution with Young Children

Seward Child Care Center Parent Workshop



Six Steps to Conflict Mediation

1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.
2. Acknowledge children's feelings.
3. Gather information.
4. Restate the problem.
5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together.
6. Be prepared to give follow-up support.



Simple recognition and acceptance of children's feelings helps them become self-aware and supports them in moving on from hurtful words and actions to an honest rendering of what happened.

Strategies for Acknowledging Feelings

Reframing children's strong feeling words

When children are very upset, they often express their feelings in very forceful ways. If we take their aggressive-sounding statements literally, we will misunderstand their feeling messages and "miss the ball." If children feel misunderstood, their feelings and hurtful actions may intensify *or* they may withdraw and give up. Thus it is important for us to quickly respond with body language and words that show we understand. To do this we reframe what children say and do while physically stopping their unsafe or destructive actions. *Reframing* means putting children's intense verbal and physical expressions into more specific and appropriate language, removing the original threats, accusations, or judgments about people and stopping and setting limits on any aggressive behavior. Reframing helps to separate people from problems by clearly stating needs and wants only. After children's feelings have calmed, problem solving can continue. The following examples il-

lustrate the use of reframing and acknowledgment with children who are at different levels in their ability to express feelings. The examples illustrate only steps 1 *(approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions)* and 2 *(acknowledge children's feelings).*

- A child wants a truck that another child is playing with. She grabs the truck away and says, "I hate you! You can't come to my birthday party, you stupid dummy!"

  Adult response: The adult places himself between the children, gently restraining the child who is grabbing, and says, "Stop. You're feeling really angry that you can't have a turn with the truck. Grabbing the truck is not okay. I know you're really angry and you want a turn with it." As the child calms, the adult begins a discussion about taking turns with the truck: "Tell me what happened...."

- A child wants to go out on a rainy day but his teacher says it's too wet. The child says to the adult, "I hate you! You'd better let me go out or my big brother is going to beat you up! He's really strong with big muscles!" The child pushes the adult.

  Adult response: "You're feeling very upset that you can't go outside. Name-calling and pushing must stop. I know that you are very upset. Let's talk about this problem." The name-calling and pushing stop, and discussion begins about what the child wanted to do outside.

Strategies for Acknowledging Feelings

- **State feelings concretely:** ("You are feeling very upset." "I can see you are really, really angry.") Do not ask questions about feelings.
- **Reframe children's hurtful words as you acknowledge feelings** (If Ofelia has called Juan a "stupid dummy," say to Ofelia: "You are feeling very angry with Juan. It's not okay to call people names when you are upset. I know you are very angry.")
- **If necessary state a limit as part of your acknowledging statement.** ("Mun, stop hitting. You are feeling very angry because David has the truck and you want it. It's not okay to hit. I know you really want the truck.")
- **Let children know you need to hold any objects in dispute** until an agreement is reached ("I need to hold this while we talk.")
- **Watch for signs that children have fully expressed their feelings** (body relaxes, crying stops, voice tones become lower and softer, children's actions or words change); then move on with problem solving.
- **If necessary, acknowledge feelings throughout the problem-solving discussion.** If a child refuses every solution offered with a loud "no," this is a clear indicator he or she is still upset and feelings need to be acknowledged again.

- A child, when not chosen to pick the book at story time, begins to cry and says to her teacher, "This is a dumb school and I'm never ever coming here again!"

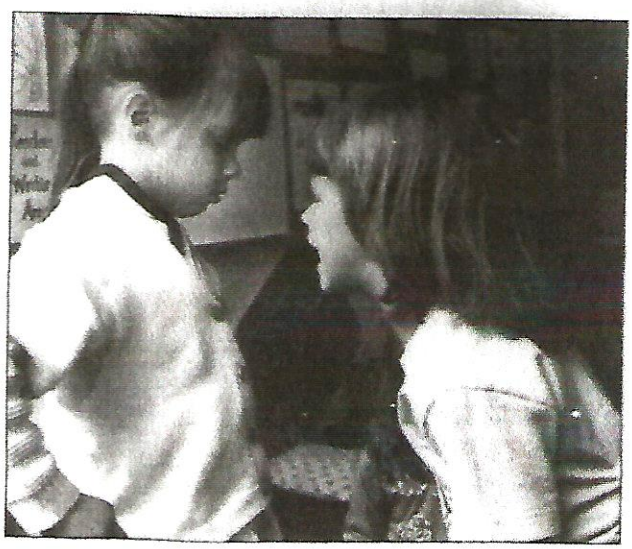
  Adult response: "You're feeling very frustrated that you didn't get to choose the book and you're feeling angry at me." The child stops crying; a discussion begins about the book choice and when the child will get to choose the book.

- A child grabs a doll out of the arms of another child who screams loudly and hits the child on the back.

  Adult response: "Hitting must stop. You're feeling really angry at her." The child begins to cry sadly, and tells the adult, "Yeah, she took my doll." Together, with the other child, they problem-solve.

- A 4-year-old child (who is beginning to be aware of and able to name feelings but who still needs to attach concrete expressions to those feelings) says, "I'm angry as a cockroach as big as this house!" (Yes, a child really said this!)

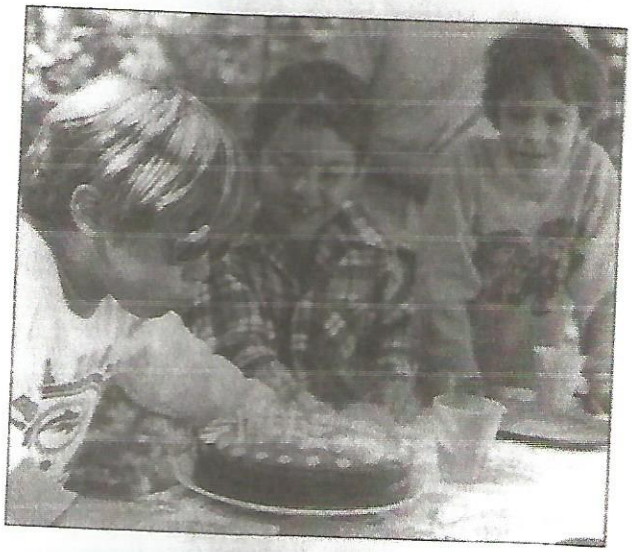
  Adult response: (The child's words are not hurtful to anyone and consequently do not need reframing as shown in the previous examples.) "Wow, your anger is as big as a cockroach and this house! You're feeling very, very angry. Your anger is sooo big." The child then repeats that he is angry, without cockroach references, and begins to describe what is happening that is upsetting him.



When young children are expressing strong feelings, they often use concrete, physical language (about big houses, mean brothers, and birthday parties, for example) to get across the full force of their feelings. Such details are their unconscious way of "beefing up" their feeling messages.

Avoiding getting derailed by children's strong feelings

In situations like these, where children's actions and words are quite intense, we may be tempted to put children in time-out or tell them to "calm down and be nice." Or, we may try to discuss specific details they have mentioned in their angry outbursts. However, we do not need to comment on the details of birthday party rejections, muscular brothers, or dumb schools to communicate our understanding of the children's feelings. Children's bold and colorful language expresses the intensity of their emotions in very concrete (and creative!) ways, but their specific words are usually not related to the actual problem. Young children use such details to get across the full force of their feelings. Such phrases are their unconscious way of "beefing up" their feeling message. However, if we respond by discussing party invitations, the kindness of brothers, the virtues of schools, and the absurdity of house-sized cockroaches, we risk getting mired in semantic arguments that miss the point. As a result, the children will not feel that their emotions have been understood. A simple statement describing what we see ("You're feeling *so* upset!") is a better way to "catch the ball" and let children know we understand.



Birthday parties are powerful events for young children, so it's not surprising that they express their strong feelings in terms of these important events: "You can't come to my birthday party!"

Responding to "I hate you, you're not my friend"

Another common feeling message heard from children is "I hate you, you're not my friend." Often adults try to correct children by saying things like "Of course John is your friend. You play

together every day." This kind of response may only intensify the problem. From the child's viewpoint, the adult is not only refusing to receive the anger message but also arguing that the message is not true. In other words, the adult has "missed the ball" and the child must now try harder to "throw it." To get the message across, the child must now insist that the statement is true, responding "I do too hate him...hate, hate, hate! I'm never, ever going to play with him again!!" For children, anger or sadness and "You're not my friend" often mean the same thing. If we respond by reframing such messages into acceptable language that names wants, needs, or feelings (Adult: "You are very angry at her!" or "You really want to play alone right now!"), children can usually express themselves fully, their feelings will subside rather than intensify, and the offending behavior will stop.

Hurtful behavior: Setting limits

Before and during the initial two steps in problem solving, children may show the intensity of their feelings by name-calling, pushing, hitting, grabbing, and/or biting. Adults must clearly and firmly stop these actions while acknowledging feelings and listening for information about the conflict at hand. Doing all this at once requires quick thinking and action. To de-escalate physical conflict, we may find it helpful to position ourselves between children, holding their hands and/or gently placing children on our laps while we simultaneously state limits and acknowledge feelings. For example, if Jesse has just said, "You're a stupid idiot!" and is hitting Leela, we may intervene by kneeling in front of Jesse, holding his hands, and saying firmly "Name-calling and hitting must stop. I know that you're very, very angry. It's okay to be angry. It's not okay to name-call and hit." And, when Jesse stops, we would add, "Let's talk about what is happening." In this example, the mediator, in quick sequence, stops the hurt, acknowledges feelings, sets limits, and begins the problem-solving dialogue. When conflicts break out, all this can and should be accomplished as quickly and calmly as possible to insure children's safety and reassure children that their feelings are recognized.