

Resolving conflicts, disagreements and arguments

Introduction

It is a normal part of growing up to have occasional arguments and disagreements, to fall-out with friends, from time to time, and not always to get on with other people.

As a school community, it is part of our ongoing duty of care to ensure children feel safe and protected from harm. While, at the same time allowing them the freedom and space to learn how to manage risk, encounter conflict and try and resolve their problems for themselves.

It is a delicate balance to strike. When things go wrong for children it is often our instinct to get involved and 'sort things out'. But, in satisfying this instinct we deny children the opportunity to learn about taking responsibility and making decisions for themselves.

Nevertheless, there are times when things can be too difficult or overwhelming for children to cope with on their own and they need adult support and advice in order to come to a resolution.

It is our aim to strive for this balance. To protect children from harm and unhappiness, while allowing them the freedom and opportunity to learn from their experiences, both good and bad. We are not advocating a community without boundaries or rules, but striving to build a community where respect is not something demanded but enshrined in values and codes developed over time. We aim to create a school that 'wraps around' the children rather than forces them to fit in.

Support and Mediation

Most problems are the normal, everyday kinds of conflict that happen all the time in schools and most of the time adults don't need to get involved. They are usually low-level disagreements and after a while children learn how to deal with them for themselves.

It is our school policy to support children as they learn this process, not to deny them help if they want it, but to give them as much opportunity to sort out their problems for themselves without taking over and doing it for them. In most circumstances adults will use the following procedure:

1. **They listen**
2. **They reflect back** – *"I can see you are very upset."* *"I can understand why you are annoyed."*
3. **They give the child the opportunity to resolve the problem for him/herself** – *"Is this something you can sort out for yourself or do you need my help?"*
4. **Depending on the answer the adult does or does not get involved.** *"Ok, I'll try and help, but I might not be able to sort it out in a way you want."* (If the adult does get involved then they need to talk to the other child/children without jumping to conclusions. Children can become very frustrated if they feel they are being treated unfairly, especially by an adult. And adult intervention can frequently make things worse, even when they are trying to make things better.)

5. **The adult listens carefully to both sides, while insisting that each side respects the others opportunity to speak.**
6. **They might then offer a suggestion to resolve the problem** – *“Well, are you still playing with the spy –x-ray glasses?” “ YES.” “OK, will you pass them on to.... When you’ve finished?” “ALRIGHT”*
7. **Ask for agreement from both sides** - *“Is that OK for you? And how about you?”* (Inevitably there will be times when an agreement can’t be reached and then either the two parties will have to agree that they can’t resolve their differences at this time and do something apart or they may need further support in the form of **mediation, see below**).

Mediation is used when children feel the problems they are faced with are more serious than they can cope with on their own. Mediation allows children the chance to speak and to be heard. It allows them the opportunity to discuss their problems and to listen to the point of view of others. However, it is not meant as a final resort or as a cure-all, but as one further opportunity for children to resolve their disagreements and conflicts for themselves.

Mediation is used for more serious incidences, not as a first step. The children will always be offered the choice of using or not using mediation. We recognise that some children might not feel comfortable using mediation and may choose not to participate.

Mediation follows the following procedure:

Step 1. Everyone gets the chance to speak without being interrupted. Remember - No one is to blame. *“Lets hear from each person, one at a time, nobody is going to be interrupted and no one is to blame.”*

Step 2. Everyone says how he/she feels about what happened. *“Can you please tell us how you feel about what happened?”*

Step 3. Everyone says their best hope for how things will end up. *“What is your best hope for how this problem will be sorted out?”*

Step 4. Everyone makes a suggestion on how to resolve the problem. *“What could we do to put it right?”*

Step 5. Finish with an agreed resolution or go back to step 1. *“Are you happy with how this is sorted, or do you think you need more time?”*

Mediation can be quite a time consuming process, particularly if the problems underlying the conflict are deep-seated and long-standing. Some problems don’t have ‘quick-fixes’ and children can’t be told to simply like each other or just be friends.

There is often no one to blame with conflicts that come to mediation. Usually they involve friendship issues or disagreements that have come to a head and have caused a fall out. Typical subjects for mediation include: *children being mean to each other; friends refusing to play or not letting others join in; name-calling and cruel words; children feeling excluded or left out.*

These are not trivial matters, the children involved can often feel very upset, victimized and picked on, but the issues dealt with in mediation are not bullying.

They are the usual differences and conflicts that children struggle with as they learn what it is to be part of a community. Mediation provides them with a structure and a means to work through these problems and a way to learn how to resolve their differences through reasoned argument rather than anger or violence.

Bullying

Mediation is not the proper forum to deal with bullying. Bullying is a very serious matter and far too difficult for young children to deal with on their own. For this reason it is important to identify bullying as bullying early and to deal with it quickly.

To help us in this process we have consulted the Norfolk County Council's Schools Bullying website where they provide professional advice on bullying. After consulting educationalists from across Children's Services they have reached a consensus on a definition of bullying.

Bullying can range from physical violence to verbal abuse and being cut out of social groups. It also includes abusive texts, e-mails or nasty notes put on websites (known as cyber bullying). Bullying is not a one off incident such as a fight or when two equals have the odd fight or quarrel.

The DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) defines bullying as:

'Behaviour by an individual or group, usually repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally. (DCSF, 2007)

This definition includes the three key characteristics of bullying i.e. It is:

- * Deliberately hurtful (including aggression)*
- * Repeated often over a period of time*
- * Difficult for the victim to defend themselves against*

Rigby (2002) described bullying as a 'systematic abuse of power'. It is this imbalance of power that is key in considering whether an incident is bullying or not.

In circumstances such as these we will immediately take action to protect the child who is being bullied and start working with the child who has been doing the bullying in order to prevent it happening again.

Of course, our aim is to create a supportive school environment where children learn early how to deal with differences and conflict, and have opportunities to develop skills and attitudes to prevent bullying occurring in the first place.