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U3C5L1

Causes of Conflict

Key Words:

Active listening

Conflict

Effective speaking

Frustration

Harassment

Hostility

Miscommunication

Relationships

Solutions

Territorial

Understanding

What You Will Learn to Do

Determine causes of conflict

Linked Core Abilities

- Do your share as a good citizen in your school, community, country, and the world

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Recognize the impact of conflict on relationships.
- Describe the four basic causes of conflict.
- Analyze five different types of conflicts
- Use "I" statements to facilitate effective communication

Introduction

What does **conflict** mean to you? Is it frightening or exciting? Is it interesting or unpleasant? Do you typically avoid it, or are you more likely to confront it?

It is inevitable that you will encounter many different forms of conflict throughout your lifetime. To make appropriate decisions and gain confidence in resolving conflicts, you must be able to

- Recognize potential conflict situations before they occur
- Recognize the warning signs and the sequences of events that can fuel conflicts
- Predict possible consequences and stay attuned to ways to stop the conflict from occurring (or escalating)

This lesson introduces basic guidelines to managing conflicts. You will learn about the causes of conflict, what you can do to prevent them, as well as the importance of maintaining good communication in these situations.

Conflict and How It Affects Us

Conflict can be defined as any situation where incompatible activities, feelings, or intentions occur together. It is an everyday occurrence at home, at school, on the job, or anywhere there are people with different beliefs, values, and experiences.

If not carefully managed, conflict can escalate to violence and harm your personal **relationships**, creating wounds that will never heal. When conflict is avoided and important issues are left unresolved, it may lead to resentment, creating a tense environment. However, if you take the necessary steps to resolve a conflict, you may find that “clearing the air” reduces tension and brings about an **understanding** that makes the relationship more open and honest in the future.

We most often find ourselves in conflict with those with whom we spend the most time: parents, friends, coworkers, teammates, and so on. You must learn to recognize that your long-term relationship with these people is more important than the result of any short-term conflict. Calmly discussing issues may often bring about a quick resolution or a realization that a problem doesn’t actually exist.

Causes of Conflict

There are many ways in which conflicts can begin: misunderstandings, embarrassment, hurt pride, prejudice, and peer pressures are just a few. Most of the factors or situations that lead to conflict can be classified as resulting from:

- Varied perspectives on the situation
- Differing belief systems and values resulting from personal background and accumulated life experiences
- Differing objectives and interests

If you recognize a potential conflict situation early, you may be able to prevent it from escalating into a dangerous fighting situation. By applying conflict management techniques, you will be able to reduce the levels of anger and **frustration**, which will make it easier to resolve the problem.

Types of Conflict and Their Warning Signs

To make good decisions and effectively manage conflict in your life, you must be able to recognize the warning signs of a potential conflict situation. Most types of conflicts belong to one of the five categories presented in the following list:

Relationship. Conflicts that occur because of strong negative emotions, stereotypes, miscommunications, or repetitive negative behaviors; **harassment** is a relationship conflict.

Data. Conflicts that occur because people are misinformed or lack information to make good decisions. If you are late to the drama club meeting because you thought it started at 2 p.m., but it actually began at 1 p.m., then you might find yourself in a data conflict.

Interest. Conflicts that result when one party believes that in order to satisfy his or her needs, the needs of an opponent must be sacrificed. A conflict over what you perceive to be an “unfair situation” would be an interest conflict. For example, if your whole soccer team had to run an extra five miles at practice because John, a teammate of yours, was late for the second time this week, you would have an interest conflict.

Structural. Conflicts that arise out of limited physical resources (including time), authority, geographic constraints, organizational changes, or other external forces. A territorial dispute is a structural kind of conflict. Similarly, if you are scheduled to begin work at your part time job at 3 p.m. on Wednesdays, but band practice is not over until 4 p.m., then you have a structural conflict.



Value. When people attempt to force their own personal beliefs or values on others. For example, if a friend keeps asking you to help him cheat on his chemistry exam, you might have a value conflict on your hands. Another example of a value conflict would be the debate over capital punishment.

Although there are many types of conflict that you may inevitably encounter, we are going to examine three common types of conflict you may find at school, at home, or in your community: sexual harassment, other personal harassments (being picked on), and “unfair” situations. The following is a description of each of these kinds of conflict and some of the warning signs that accompany them.

Sexual Harassment

Four out of every five students say that they are sexually harassed often or occasionally. Sexual harassment is unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that is both demeaning and wrong. These unwelcome behaviors are sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other physical, verbal, or visual conduct of a sexual nature.

Specifically, sexual harassment includes explicit sexual propositions; suggestive comments; sexually oriented kidding, teasing, or practical jokes; offensive or obscene language or gestures; displays of offensive or obscene printed visual material; and physical contact of a sexual nature. The most common form of sexual harassment, although oftentimes used unintentionally or subconsciously, is to address a person as “dear,” “honey,” “sweetheart,” or some other “term of endearment.”

Other Personal Harassments (Being Picked On)

Harassers use verbal, physical, or visual means to annoy or pick on someone, possibly because of their race, ancestry, national origin, religion, age, physical or mental disability, sex, or sexual orientation. Oftentimes, harassers like to pick on people who lack self-confidence by using derogatory remarks, slurs, jokes, cartoons, pictures, or certain gestures that demean, ridicule, or torment the individual.

Unfair Situations

“That’s not fair!” is a cry that can represent every aspect of your life’s development. It involves following rules regardless of whether you like them or not, reaching compromises with others, and respecting the rights of others. When someone makes a decision that may be fair for some, yet unfair for you and others, it is oftentimes hard to accept the answer to the questions, “From whose perspective was that decision made?” or “What criteria was used to make that decision?” Remember, fair does not mean equal.

Risk Factors for Violence

When scientists talk about preventing a disease such as cancer, they focus on eliminating those factors that put people at risk for the disease. The same reasoning has been applied to the study of violence. Violence-prevention experts have identified some specific risk factors for violence. Poverty, exposure to media and family violence, the availability of weapons, drug abuse, and membership in gangs are all important risk factors for violence. As you read about these risk factors, think about the ways each one might increase the likelihood of violence.

Poverty

Statistics show that violence rates are highest in poor urban communities where unemployment rates are high. The term “free-floating anger” is used to describe the frustration and **hostility** that sometimes result when people feel unable to improve their lives. A lack of jobs, money, adequate food, health care, and respect from others all contribute to feelings of hopelessness and anger. When free-floating anger is already high, a minor event may trigger a person to react more violently than normal. It is important to emphasize, however, that most people who are poor do not demonstrate violent behaviors. The anger and frustration of poverty are just two of many risk factors for violence.

Media Violence

From your first cartoon to the latest movie, music video, or video/computer game, you have learned that violence, excitement, and entertainment go together. You can probably recall lines or scenes from action movies that show violence as a reasonable response in many situations. What these scenes do not show, however, are the real results of violence—pain, tragedy, remorse, and more.



Studies suggest that people’s attitudes, especially those of young children, can be shaped by media violence. Because children have had little real-life experience, they may interpret what they see on television quite literally. Children who witness a lot of media violence may grow up with an exaggerated sense of the amount of violence in the world. They also may tend to overreact with violence when confronted with threatening situations in their own lives.

Recently much attention has been focused on the media’s portrayal of violence toward women, especially in some kinds of music and music videos. The audience for these

forms of entertainment is mostly teenagers and young adults. Some people suspect that these media portrayals are partly responsible for the rise in dating violence, rape, and other forms of violence toward women. Do you think this could be true?

Family Violence

Children learn by imitating the behavior of parents and other important people in their lives. It is not surprising, then, that children who grow up in violent homes are more apt to use violence to solve their own problems. Violence may be the only problem-solving strategy that these children know.

How can children learn nonviolent methods for handling anger? The most effective way is to see such methods used by adults in solving their own problems and in disciplining their children. Parents need to discourage their children from fighting by suggesting alternative ways to resolve disagreements, too. Also, parents can impart antiviolence values by discouraging children from playing with certain toys or watching violent movies or television shows and by sharing their own feelings about violence with their children.

Availability of Weapons

Do guns kill people or do people kill people? This difficult question gets to the heart of a controversial issue—the relationship between weapons and violence.

Some people do not believe that the availability of weapons is an important risk factor for violence. They point to countries such as Switzerland, where guns are found in nearly every household. Yet, homicide rates in Switzerland are very low. Other people, however, disagree.



Most people do agree that when weapons are used in fights, fights are more deadly. Yet the majority of people who purchase handguns in this country do so for protection. By having a gun, however, statistics show that these people are actually doubling their chances of being killed in a fight. What results is an unending cycle. High homicide rates lead to an increase in gun purchasing, which, in turn, leads to an increase in homicide rates. This then leads, once again, to more gun purchasing. Such a cycle may be difficult to break.

Drug Abuse

Would it surprise you to learn that 50 percent of all homicide victims have alcohol in their bloodstreams? Would you expect the statistics to be similarly high for assailants if they were known?

Although there is a correlation between violence and alcohol use, the reasons behind it are not entirely clear. Alcohol affects the brain, clouding a person's sense of judgment. A lack of judgment may lead a person to say or do things that he or she ordinarily would not. This behavior may lead to a fight. In other cases, however, alcohol is used more as an excuse or "to get up the nerve" to carry out preplanned acts of violence.



Drugs other than alcohol also are linked to violence. Similar to alcohol, illegal drugs such as crack cocaine can affect a person's judgment and behavior. In addition, people who are addicted to drugs may resort to robbery or other crimes to get money for drugs. Because many drugs are illegal and sold for a large profit, the people who sell drugs often carry weapons. Both of these facts add to the threat of violence.

Membership in Gangs

The term "gang" describes a variety of groups, from criminal organizations to loose bands of rowdy teens. Generally the term gang refers to groups that are organized to control a specific neighborhood or "turf." Such gangs are called **territorial** gangs or "fighting" gangs because they will fight those who intrude on their turf. Most gangs sell drugs, and many have moved into the lucrative suburban and rural drug markets.

Although young people join gangs, about two-thirds of gang members are adults. They recruit poor students from troubled families. Often the recruits know of no other way, except gang membership, to gain a sense of belonging or community. Holding elaborate initiation ceremonies, wearing certain colors and jewelry, and using secret hand signs are some of the ways gang members identify themselves. To join a gang, new members may undergo a beating, or gang leaders may order them to commit a crime, such as robbery, kidnapping, rape, or murder. Quitting a gang can be much more difficult than joining one.

Small, non-territorial gangs can form in any town. These groups may identify with a style of music or dress that sets them apart from their peers. Similar to all gangs, these groups isolate their members from the community.

Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

You have control over how you choose to deal with conflict. In some cases, the best course of action is to walk away or do nothing at all. You may find it best to ignore the conflict if

- The issue or situation is unimportant or trivial to you
- You will probably not see the other person again
- The other person is just trying to provoke a fight
- The timing is wrong and a cooling-off period is needed

Although choosing to walk away from a conflict may be difficult, doing so in these situations will demonstrate a great deal of maturity and self-control.

In other cases, however, it is best to confront the conflict. Avoiding the issue will not resolve it, and unresolved, lingering conflict can lead to resentment, hostility, and may even escalate to violence. In these situations, using a process to manage the conflict and establishing certain ground rules will help you to resolve the issues peacefully. The basic steps in managing conflict are as follows:

- Prepare yourself to deal with the conflict
- Find a mutually agreeable time and place
- Define the conflict
- Communicate an understanding
- Brainstorm to find alternate solutions
- Agree on the most workable solution



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We all experience emotions in reaction to conflict. These emotions can include nervousness, fear, embarrassment, anger, frustration, and anxiety. These are strong feelings that can propel you into inappropriate or destructive behavior. Take time to identify your feelings. If not acknowledged, these emotions will become a barrier to resolving the conflict.

We need to maintain emotional control to communicate in a calm, even tone. Screaming and name-calling will only serve to worsen the situation. Some techniques that people use to remain calm and release tension in stressful situations include: deep breathing, vigorous exercise, counting to 10, pounding or yelling into a pillow, and talking to a friend.



Courtesy of Army JROTC

Choose a place to discuss the conflict that is comfortable and nonthreatening for both of you and where you can be alone. Some people may feel compelled to act in an aggressive way if they have an audience. You should also make sure that you have chosen a time when you are both calm and ready to discuss the issues at hand.



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Two of the most important skills that you need to develop in order to effectively manage conflict are: **effective speaking** (expressing your needs, feelings, and reasons) and **active listening**. Each person involved in the **conflict** must communicate “their perspective or feelings on the situation,” “what they want,” and “why.” Be sure to describe the conflict in clear, concrete terms, focusing on behaviors, feelings, consequences, and desired changes. Be specific and start your sentences with “I,” not “You.”



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“I” messages are statements that tell how you feel. They are the most appropriate way to express your feelings in a calm and respectful manner. By using “I” messages, your communications do not take on a blaming or accusatory tone. “I” messages have three

parts: to state a feeling, to describe a specific behavior, and to state how it affects you. An example of the parts of an “I” message include “I feel” (state feeling) when you (describe specific behavior) because (state how it affects you). For example, “I feel hurt when you tell someone something I told you in secret because I didn’t want anyone else to know.”

In addition to defining the conflict, each party must also feel that they have been heard and understood. This is where active listening comes into play. Request that the other person describe how the situation looks and feels from their perspective. Listen to really understand the other person’s feelings and needs. Try to step back and imagine how you would feel if you were in the other person’s shoes. Make sure that the other person knows that you are trying to understand his or her point of view. You may want to repeat back your understanding of what you have heard, or you could say something similar to, “I know this issue is important to you because ____.” Sometimes, however, you will find that it is necessary to agree to disagree.



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To resolve a conflict, both of you must identify possible **solutions**. When identifying potential solutions to the conflict, it is important to remain positive and be open to compromise. Remember that the conflict is a problem for both of you to solve together, not a battle to be won. You should take turns offering alternative solutions, examining the consequences of each solution. Be creative and focus on solutions rather than pass blame. Do not be judgmental of the other person’s ideas.

To reach an agreement on a solution, you both need to be committed to resolving the conflict. The conflict ends when both parties reach an agreement that meets everyone’s needs and is fair to both of you.

Consider the phrases below to help you remember the steps for effectively managing conflict in your life.



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I want ...	You both have the conflict. You must work together to solve it constructively and respectfully.
I feel ...	You both have feelings. You must express them to resolve the conflict. Keeping anger, frustration, hurt, fear, or sadness inside only makes the conflict more difficult to resolve.
My reasons are ...	You both have reasons for wanting what you want and feeling as you do. Ask for each other's reasons and ensure you understand them. Recall that at times you must <u>agree</u> to <u>disagree</u> .
My understanding of you is ...	You both have viewpoints. To resolve the conflict constructively, you must see the conflict from both sides.
Maybe we should try ...	You both need to come up with wise agreements that make both people happy.
Let's choose and shake!	You <u>both</u> must select the agreement that seems fair. You should not agree on a solution that leaves one party happy and the other unhappy.

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Communication Skills

Although **miscommunication** can lead to conflict, good communication is the key to settling problems peacefully.

Language is extremely powerful. If you have ever heard the phrase, “those are fighting words,” you know that there are some words that can escalate a conflict and others that can be used to diffuse one. Some examples of fighting words include, never, always, unless, can't, won't, don't, should, and shouldn't. Likewise, good communication is blocked when either party blames, insults, puts the other down, interrupts, or makes threats or excuses. On the other hand, words that can be used to de-escalate a conflict by include words such as, maybe, perhaps, sometimes, what if, seems like, I feel, I think, and I wonder. Try to use these words when facing a conflict situation.

Nonverbal communication, or body language, also has a tremendous impact on those who observe and interpret it. It can encourage or discourage a fight. When trying to resolve a conflict, be sure to maintain eye contact, and use a tone of voice that is sincere and not intimidating or sarcastic. You should also keep your legs and arms uncrossed, and your fists unclenched.

Successful conflict resolution and negotiation depends on the use of positive communication skills.

Conclusion

Conflict is a natural part of life. It can be positive or negative depending on how you choose to manage it. By recognizing potential conflicts and their warning signs, and using conflict management strategies to help you make appropriate decisions, you will have confidence and be better prepared to deal with conflict in the future.



Lesson Check-up

1. Describe risk factors that contribute to violence. How, in your opinion, can the simple act of watching violent television shows impact a small child to become more violent?

2. What are the steps for dealing with conflict?

3. Suppose there is a conflict between you and a classmate over wanting to sit in the same seat in class. Suppose you have trouble seeing from the back of the class and want to sit in the chair because it is at the front of the class. Suppose the other classmate wants to sit in that chair because it is next to his best friend. What are some “I” statements you could use to help the two of you find a solution?