

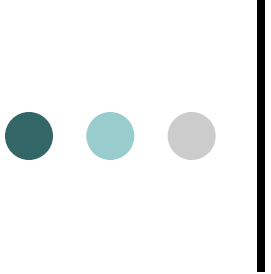
**Understanding the young  
child at play:  
Addressing conflicts,  
Teaching skills**

**Pat Blackwell, Ph.D.**



# A few words about what makes a young child “tick”

- burgeoning independence or autonomy “Me Do”- skills do not always match goals
- language- **one and two year-olds working on autonomy are willing to play at almost anything as long as they get their way.**
  - Continued....

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- push-pull between independence and knowing they are dependent on adults for emotional needs
  - social understanding (empathy) still not well developed. Developing *sense of self*- beginning to learn me/not me relationships
  - Not yet skilled at self regulation (waiting is hard; when tired or frustrated they may fall apart)



## **Some reasonable expectations about young children in social situations**

- Conflict is inevitable and is healthy. If handled well it is a learning opportunity
- Sometimes a negative behavior like biting, pushing or pinching is due to an inability to use words or to invite play with a peer. Observe your child to understand his or her behavior.

- Children display their emotions with their behavior rather than with words. Understanding and controlling their emotion-driven behavior takes time.
- Adults can facilitate this with helping kids learn about their emotions and teaching them about the feelings of others and about good choices. Tell them what they can do with their behavior not just what they cannot do.
- Young child cannot be expected to share. Only with the advent of empathy will children learn to share.
- Young children are egocentric- they filter things through their own experience and their own orientation to things.





# Toddler property laws-

## Kyle Pruett

- *If I like it, it's mine*
- *If it might be mine, it's mine*
- *If it's in my head it's mine*
- *If I can take it from you, it's mine*
- *If I had it before, it's mine*
- *If I'm making something, all the parts are mine*
- *If it's mine it must never appear to be yours in any way*
- *If it looks like mine, it's mine*
- *If I think it's mine, it's mine*



# Evolution of play with peers

- Watching (babies)
- Play in same vicinity (babies and young tots) different props/objects
- Play alongside other children using same props but each with own fantasy or ideas (toddlers)
- Cooperative play (preschool)- Children share common theme or idea. They work together and negotiate rules and roles of play. This sort of play which involves verbal negotiation doesn't happen until 4 or 5 years.
- **Note** *this development doesn't happen in a even upward climb it is more like steps. Also stress and new situations can make children regress to earlier level.*



# Understanding Conflicts

- ***group discussion:***

- “what are some of your feelings around children's conflicts?”
- “ how many think conflicts are always bad or uncomfortable and want them to stop as fast as possible?”
- “What is the source of this discomfort?”
- “What can children learn from conflicts?”





# Dealing with children's conflicts

- **Most of us are trained to avoid conflicts**
- Many of us have definite **scripts** when dealing with children's conflicts such as
  - “Whoever had it first gets it”
  - “Who ever started it is wrong”
  - “The older child has to give into the needs of the younger”
  - “Children should always share”
    - Ask group to share their scripts

# When to intervene- *Do not hover, but do Observe.*

- If:
  - children are not disturbed or upset (even though there is toy taking and shoving)
- Then:
  - do not intervene. Both partners can learn.



- If:
  - A child gets hurt, or the children begin a raging conflict
- Then:
  - Regard it as a learning experience, not something that you have to solve. Ask yourself, *how can I use this experience to help each child learn about problem solving, or relationships.* Focus on Helping the children solve their own conflict

# *An example:*

- John and Mary are two 18 month olds playing together in a new playgroup. Mary watches John as he plays for a while. She then walks over to John, grunts and bites him on the arm. He starts to cry.





First:

- Ask yourself “why did Mary bite John? What was she trying to say or communicate? ”How can you use this experience as a learning opportunity?

- Second:

Consider the motive of Mary. Maybe she was saying “wow you are nice. I want to play with you. So to get something going I will bite you”.

- Third:

Teach her what she can do to make a friend or to get something going. Facilitate this; show them how to play *Ring around the Rosey*, for instance. Also give John a voice. He can be coached to say “NO” when someone tries to bite him.

- Fourth:

Observe the two, because the scene is likely to repeat itself. This is how children learn. Be consistent.

# Helping children solve conflicts

- Not all adults feel children should be encouraged to find their own solutions to conflicts. For some adults, conflict is so stressful they just want it over fast as possible so they solve the problem.



# Motivation to help children solve conflicts

- Teaching children the social skills of communication and conflict resolution is an important part of parenting. Without experience in conflict resolution, children are at a loss about getting along.




- When we support children in managing their own conflicts the resolution of those conflicts may take longer and be noisier, but we will be helping our children learn about:
  - Cause and effect
  - Listening
  - Empathy
  - Sharing
  - Problem solving

# Motivation to help children solve conflicts

- Conflict resolution gives children skills to succeed in social relationships in preschool and beyond. The earlier they learn it the better.





# BASIC ASSUMPTIONS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Davis & Keyser (1997). Becoming the Parent You Want to Be

- Behind every behavior is an impulse to communicate that can be supported
- People hurt each other when they are hurting (upset, frustrated) and are more likely to be aggressive when compromised by fatigue, frustration, or anxiety
- Just having one's feelings "heard" or respected can help reduce disappointment and anger when they don't get what they want.
- Conflict can be a learning opportunity for both children in the conflict (mutual solutions are very helpful)

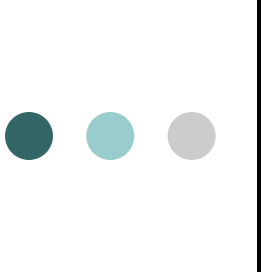


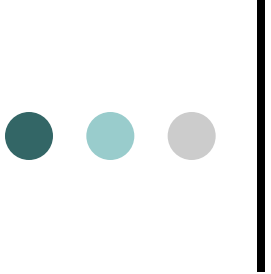
# THE BASICS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

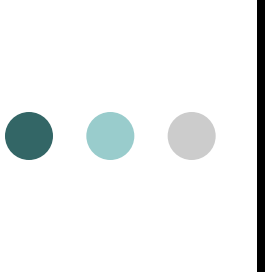


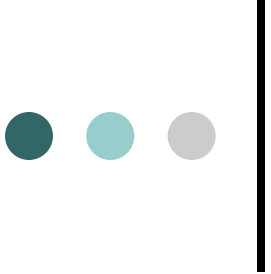
- **Remember your role is not to just stop the conflict. Your role is to teach.** Stay calm and focused. This is especially hard if you yourself are uncomfortable with conflict.



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- **Assess the situation and your energy level-** When a fight breaks out think. How much energy do I have to help them right now? And think, do they have the energy to learn right now? Sometimes it is better to give children a couple of reasonable choices about their behavior then to involve them in coming up with a solution.
  - **Keep both parties safe- set clear limits** “I am not going to let you hurt Eddie”

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- **Model what you want to teach-** this will depend on age and stage of child's development. Model physical gestures to pre-verbal children, use language with toddlers “when John bites tell him NO”; use a cognitive approach with preschoolers- show them by thinking out loud, how to negotiate a difficult situation.

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- **Focus on the child and her feelings rather than the toy they are focused on.** Don't just bring in another object if they are fighting over a toy. Instead talk about how they can play together with the object. When you focus on how kids can work things out you give them the message “you learning how to problem solve is more important than who gets the ball right now”

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- **Help children learn about their emotions and learn how to communicate these emotions in a non hurtful way.** Facilitate children's dialogue with each other. Say "John do you have something you want to say to Helen?" Do you want me to go over with you to talk to her?" Give children words for the emotions they feel. This will help them feel in control of their emotions, which leads to control of emotion-driven behavior.

- When a child is standing there crying **encourage him to use words** to express what he is feeling. Say “Juan, are you saying you are upset and still want to play with the truck Louis took from you?”



- ● ● | ○ **Encourage both children to listen to each other.** Call attention to the emotions and behavior of each child. Say “Helen do you see that Joanne is still crying? She is still sad that you took her ball. Joanne what do you want to say to Helen? Helen what do you have to say?”





- **Clarify communication by reframing name calling.** When Adam calls Helen a poo-poo head, you can say, “Adam it sounds like you are really mad at Helen. I’m not going to let you hurt Helen with your words. You can tell her you are mad but you cannot call her a poo-poo head..”



# ● ● ● | Say you're sorry.....

- **Forcing children to say I'm sorry doesn't work because it is not sincere.** Until children learn about empathy, they will not truly be sorry. To force them to say something they don't mean is meaningless. It doesn't teach them what they can do to work things out in the first place.





## ***Here is a brief example:***

- “You were playing together and you shoved Amy and now she is crying. Let’s try and figure out what you were trying to tell Amy when you pushed her and see if we can do something to help her feel better” Just to have said “tell Amy you are sorry” would have robbed the two from learning about empathy, emotions and negotiation. Kids don’t learn compassion by just saying “I’m sorry”, it is a quick fix for parents.

● ● ● | Children can learn to get along  
but it takes time and teaching...





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