

THE PEACE TABLE IN ACTION



by
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How can early childhood educators support children's development of a peaceful approach to conflict resolution? How can we help children in choosing peaceful solutions to interpersonal problems? How can the social emotional environment be structured in such a way that children's first impulse is to reconcile their differences and generate a solution to problems where everyone is satisfied? How can we support children's development of nurturing, tolerant, accepting, mutually empowering approaches to conflict? Do we expect to eradicate conflict from children's lives? No, that would be completely unrealistic and would eliminate many wonderful opportunities for children's growth in their ability to be peacemakers. Watch what happens with four-year-olds Rose and Lydia. . .

Rose: Lydia, I was using that doll.
Lydia: But Rose, you weren't holding it. It was in the crib.
Sharon, the teacher: It sounds like there is a problem here. Let's take this doll over to the Peace Table and you two can try to work out this problem."
Lydia: Rose, you weren't holding that doll or near that doll so I thought you weren't using it.
Rose: Lydia, my baby was taking a nap and I was doing some cooking while she slept. You can't take my baby.
Sharon: We have some new information. Rose was still using that doll but Lydia thought she was done because Rose wasn't near the doll. What are we going to do about this problem?
Rose: I know. Lydia can have a turn when I'm done.
Sharon: What do you think about that, Lydia?
Lydia: No . . . I want a turn now. I know, Rose, you can be the mom and I can be the babysitter.
Rose: O.K., and you can have a turn when I'm done.

Sharon: So Rose is going to be the mom and Lydia is going to be the babysitter and Lydia will have the baby when Rose is done.
Lydia: We solved the problem!!
Rose: Yeah.

Why did this episode end so peacefully? Does simply adding a Peace Table to a classroom insure there will be peaceful solutions to every problem? Actually, these two children have had two years of experience using the Peace Table at the University of Rhode Island Child Development Center as a safe and peaceful place to go to solve problems nonviolently with their peers. At first, children require a great deal of adult support and input in negotiating their problems, and often, it is the adult who guides the discussion. The steps which can be followed to guide these conflict resolution discussions are:

- *Initiate the mediation. It looks like there is a problem here. Or, what's happening here?*
- *Clarify each child's perspective.* In this step each child is given the opportunity to explain his/her perspective on the situation.
- *Summarizing.* In this step, the teacher clearly articulates a summary of each child's perspective.
- *Generating alternative solutions. What can we do about this problem?* In this step, the teacher supports children's generation of alternative solutions.
- *Agreeing on a solution.* Here, both children agree on a solution to the problem. It is critical to allow sufficient time for children to arrive at a mutually satisfying solution.
- *Following through.* The teacher checks with the children later to be sure that the solution actually satisfied everyone. *You had a problem with that doll before. You two solved that problem. Did your solution work?*

These discussions provide opportunities for everyone involved in a conflict to feel empowered and to participate in generating solutions to the problem. This process is

effective with many types of problems and conflicts that arise daily in an early childhood classroom. Some of these conflicts involve possessions (two children want the same truck at the same time), position (two children want to sit on the teacher's left side at the same time), exclusion (*you can't play at the texture table with us*), and misunderstandings or accidents (*I didn't mean to hurt you when I stepped on your finger*). As time goes on and children gain more experiences with the problem-solving process, they are able to become more and more independent in clarifying misunderstandings and nonviolently solving their problems at the Peace Table.

The Peace Table is one tool used at the University of Rhode Island Child Development Center as part of the overarching approach to social interactions that encourages children to peacefully interact with each other. This method encourages children to accept diversity and to attempt to understand differing perspectives. This approach helps children to see all problems as solvable

and scaffolds children in their attempts to "solve the problem." Within an environment where adults assist children to feel empowered to actively solve interpersonal problems, children like Lydia and Rose quickly become peacemakers.

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