

# Socio-Emotional Skills for Conflict Resolution

Anuja Venkataraman

Teachers in classrooms have several expectations from children. These include expecting them not to get overexcited and scream when something interesting happens; not to get so angry with a friend who has hit them that they also hit them back and aggravate the situation; to be able to share stationery or books if needed without feeling possessive about them; not to fight over things like who will sit next to the teacher in the bus on a school trip, or argue about who will borrow the duster from the next class, or answer the question next; and to be able to wait their turn.

What seem like reasonable expectations from an adult viewpoint are sometimes quite challenging for young children. Not only do many everyday challenges have a cognitive angle, but they also have emotional and social bearings.

Learning about the link between the ability to manage conflicts peacefully and the emotional intelligence of a child can be very useful. It can help teachers manage their own expectations, as well as plan what and how to teach so that students can learn, grow and fulfil some of those expectations. It can also help students and teachers spend a happy day at school.

Intrapersonal intelligence is about how we manage our feelings, while interpersonal intelligence is about how we respond to the feelings of others. Both of these are crucial to our ability to behave in a constructive, problem-solving manner.

## Social-emotional learning

Teaching students about emotions can be very valuable. Emotional literacy includes being aware of one's own emotions, managing them, having the motivation to overcome setbacks, having empathy, and developing social skills like communication and conflict resolution. Social-emotional learning involves helping students learn about all these different aspects.

*Self-awareness* is fundamental, without which no other emotional learning can happen. We can

manage our emotions only after we become self-aware. Remaining motivated when faced with setbacks, also known as *resilience*, is what keeps us going despite frustration, fear, and failure. *Empathy* is the bridge from our emotional to our social capacities (Tricia Jones, 2003). Empathy requires self-awareness and an ability not to be so overwhelmed by a person's own emotions that they cannot understand the other person's feelings, needs and beliefs. *Social skills* include being able to communicate, build healthy relationships and being able to resolve conflicts.

Self-awareness, resilience, empathy and social skills are the building blocks for being able to learn to handle conflicts constructively.

## Conflict Resolution

Conflict Resolution is the process of managing a conflict constructively such that both sides achieve their goal, and the relationship between them is improved. Being able to manage conflicts is an important skill for the individual, not only for the present but also for the future. It also helps to create a more supportive and safe community and shows an example of a non-violent method of negotiating and making decisions with respect and goodwill.

Typically, the conflict resolution process involves steps such as the following:

First, both the persons in the conflict calm down and agree to solve the problem together. They agree to not call each other names or use put-downs and respectfully enter the conflict resolution process. Then, each of them takes turns expressing their feelings and needs using I-messages. (The format of the I-message is as follows: *I feel \_\_\_ when \_\_\_ because \_\_\_ and I need \_\_\_*). Along with speaking, it is also important to listen to the other person very carefully and then try to come up with solutions that work for both and choose the best one.

## Partnership of Conflict Resolution and Emotional Intelligence

Every step outlined in the above conflict resolution process has an accompanying requirement of emotional awareness, restraint, and expression by the child. To understand the steps, we will use an example of two students – Arhan and Archana, who are fighting over a doll.

### *Step 1: Calm down*

Teachers and caregivers may have experienced how ineffective it is to tell a screaming, anxious child or an angry, hurt one to calm down. Even adults rarely have the capacity to listen to directions from their own minds to not be nervous, stop worrying, and be calm in stressful situations. How can they help children to learn how to ‘self-soothe’ or calm down?

Calming down involves learning to recognise one’s feelings – self-awareness – and then quickly being able to identify a way to handle one’s rising emotions. This emotional skill will prevent the brain from getting hijacked into a fight-or-flight mode. Students can then use their calm minds and hearts for creative and critical problem-solving.

Arhan was playing with the doll when Archana suddenly snatched it away. But Arhan was able to recognise his frustration and recalled the strategy of deep breathing taught by his teacher to get rid of the anger ‘cloud’ forming over his head. He took deep breaths and with every breath out he imagined the anger cloud getting blown away. This helped him calm down enough to be able to resolve his conflict more effectively.

### *Step 2: No put-downs or name-calling*

A part of managing emotions is the ability to control or delay impulses. A child who has calmed down may resist calling the other names. One can avoid calling names either out of obedience to rules or through genuine respect for the other person. Avoiding hurtful behaviour due to obedience to rules is risky and could be inconsistent, while authentic respect comes from meaningful connection. If students feel connected to themselves and their feelings, they respect themselves and others. Respect from empathy could work much better in restraining name-calling than rule-based respect.

Arhan remembered that Archana was his friend and that before this argument they had played

together several times. This affection helped Arhan to stop himself from calling Archana angry names, although she had so clearly wronged him by snatching away his doll.

### *Step 3: Express feelings and needs using ‘I-messages’*

To be able to use the ‘I-message’ during a conflict, students have to be able to identify their feelings, have the vocabulary to express them, and also feel safe enough to express a genuine feeling. A student’s ability not only to articulate their true feelings, but also to identify them, and their capacity for self-awareness depends on classroom safety. A student may not know exactly what she/he is feeling in a threatening or disrespectful atmosphere. To aid the process, teachers can help to develop a safe classroom atmosphere where students are encouraged to connect to and express their feelings.

Arhan’s teacher would frequently use circle time for students to come together at the end of the school day and reflect on their day. Some basic rules of speaking and listening were co-created, which helped Arhan learn that the feelings of Archana and the others were just as important as his own. During the conflict, this sense of safety and connection to his own feelings helped him express his view of the situation to Archana.

### *Step 4: Listen carefully to the other person*

Listening can be done in many ways. These include ‘not really listening’, ‘listening to find fault’, and ‘listening carefully’. Not listening happens when the fight-or-flight chemistry is aroused by conflict, and our brain is full of angry and defensive thoughts while the other person speaks. When we are listening to find fault, we tend to pounce on an argument opposing our own and attack it. Careful listening begins with genuine attention, works with respecting an open heart and mind, and ends with understanding and empathy. Empathic listening becomes possible when the ability to assimilate the perspective of others is developed and is an important building block for creativity and critical thinking for constructive problem-solving.

Arhan had been given the practice to listen authentically through classroom exercises of deep listening, paraphrasing and setting and practising communication rules. This helped him listen carefully to Archana’s side of the story without jumping to conclusions or finding fault with her.

### *Step 5: Look for solutions that work for both*

Creative solutions come from paying attention to genuine needs for which empathy is needed. This needs safety in the classroom because inquiry and expression of needs can make us feel vulnerable. Safety is also very important to encourage creative, critical thinking. On feeling threatened, we downshift our thinking which invokes the feeling of helplessness, not looking for possibilities and feeling unsafe to take risks or challenge old ideas. Real thinking which involves making connections, higher-order thinking, and creativity is not possible in an unsafe environment.

Archana and Arhan's safe classroom environment supported them in calmly thinking of ways to solve their conflict.

### *Step 6: Choose the best solution*

Finding a solution that works for both requires those in conflict to manage feelings of impatience, frustration, disappointment and fear that come along the way. To remain motivated, they need to be able to hope and maintain optimism despite setbacks. Finding a solution that works for all also requires social skills, like sensitivity to others, problem-solving, and effective communication.

Arhan and Archana had seen other children making up after fights. Though they took some time to reconcile, they ultimately decided to play with the doll together as Arhan understood that Archana had been waiting for a long time and lost patience and snatched the doll as she could not think of how else to play with it.

### **Using SEL as a foundation for Conflict Resolution Education**

A few things schools can do to lay the foundation for conflict resolution by supporting social-emotional learning are as follows:

#### *Create classroom agreements*

Students can be taught and supported to create agreements collaboratively. This will go a long way in creating an environment of safety and openness, both of which are needed for the fearless expression of important issues, and work towards resolving conflicts. Simple rules like taking turns and listening patiently when others are speaking can be co-created from a very early age.

Some ground rules for classroom communication can be developed. These include no interruptions,

put-downs or judging, having respect, honesty, fairness, some non-negotiables, like the right to pass (and not share views) and willingness to forgive. When students feel ownership of the rules, they are more willing to follow them.

#### *Build a vocabulary of emotions*

The ability to identify feelings helps in communication for conflict resolution. The vocabulary of feelings can be taught in playful and creative ways, such as using the arts and giving voice to ideas through colour, movement, metaphor, gesture, symbols or direct verbal explanations. Vocabulary helps students develop self-awareness as they use these words in reflecting and writing about their lives. They also develop empathy when sharing reflections.

Students can be taught about anger management – recognising signs of anger building up, developing strategies to calm anger before it hijacks the brain, preventing anger eruption by understanding the pattern of how their anger is triggered, and what they do that sets off other people's anger. They can learn how fear and shame work and how to manage them using stories, arts, and other ways.

#### *Speaking and listening*

Authentic speaking and deep listening ensure safety in classrooms. Deep listening is a precondition to active listening, and it involves listening without questions, interruptions, or immediate responses. Deep listening encourages authentic speaking – as students can look inside for what they want to say only when no one is prompting them, asking them questions, giving reassuring comments and guiding them, etc.

It can be first practised in pairs, and then in a sharing circle. Listening circles can be a powerful tool to build the classroom community.

### **Conclusion**

Students can be supported from a very early age to become aware of and manage their feelings, remain motivated despite setbacks, develop empathy for others, and build social and communication skills. This can be done by encouraging students to collectively create classroom agreements about how to communicate and interact with one another; by helping them build a vocabulary of emotions through arts, music, books, and symbols; and by building communication skills and empathy by

encouraging authentic speaking and deep listening. This emotional and social learning not only holds

intrinsic value but is also an important foundation for constructive conflict resolution.

#### References

Tricia Jones and Randy Compton. *Kids Working It Out - Strategies and Stories for Making Peace in Our Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003



**Anuja Venkataraman** is a Research Associate associated with the Interest Group on Dialogue, Fraternity, and Justice at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Before her MA Education from Azim Premji University, she has worked with children of various ages in a few alternative schools in Bangalore for several years. She may be contacted at [anuja.venkataraman@apu.edu.in](mailto:anuja.venkataraman@apu.edu.in)

Nurturing wellbeing is the collective responsibility of both teachers and school leaders. While teachers themselves need to work toward developing their own competencies that lead to wellbeing, leaders at the workplace must be committed to creating a positive school climate that accords teachers autonomy, professional development opportunities, and possibilities of developing trusting relationships with learners and colleagues.

*Jwairia Saleem, Rethinking Teacher Wellbeing | Beyond Stress and Burnout, p 6*