

Teaching Students How to Navigate Conflict with Peers

A Practical Guide for Building Social Problem-Solving Skills, Communication, and Positive Relationships

Purpose & Overview

This guide supports educators in teaching students how to navigate conflict with peers in healthy, respectful, and productive ways. Conflict is a natural part of social interaction and occurs in every school setting. However, many students lack the skills needed to manage disagreements, communicate effectively, and resolve problems appropriately.

Students with disabilities may experience additional challenges with perspective taking, emotional regulation, communication, impulse control, or social problem-solving, making peer conflict more difficult to manage.

The purpose of this guide is to help educators teach conflict-resolution skills proactively so students can build stronger relationships, reduce behavioral incidents, and develop lifelong social-emotional competencies.

Instructional Outcomes

Effective use of this guide helps educators:

- ✓ Teach students effective conflict-resolution skills
 - ✓ Improve peer relationships and classroom climate
 - ✓ Strengthen communication and self-advocacy
 - ✓ Promote emotional regulation during disagreements
 - ✓ Reduce peer conflicts and behavioral incidents
 - ✓ Build long-term social-emotional competence
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Understanding Peer Conflict

Conflict occurs when two or more individuals have different:

- Opinions
- Perspectives
- Goals
- Preferences
- Expectations
- Reactions to a situation

Conflict itself is not the problem.

The challenge occurs when students do not have the skills to respond appropriately.

Important Consideration

The goal is not to eliminate conflict.

The goal is to teach students how to manage conflict respectfully, safely, and constructively.

Students who learn healthy conflict-resolution skills are better prepared for school, employment, relationships, and community interactions.

Common Reasons Peer Conflicts Occur

<i>Source of Conflict</i>	<i>Example</i>
<i>Miscommunication</i>	Students misunderstand each other's intentions
<i>Differing Opinions</i>	Students disagree during group work
<i>Competition</i>	Disagreements during games or classroom activities
<i>Personal Space Issues</i>	One student invades another's space
<i>Social Misunderstandings</i>	Difficulty interpreting social cues
<i>Emotional Reactions</i>	Frustration, anger, or impulsive responses escalate a situation

Understanding the cause of a conflict helps students identify appropriate solutions.

High-Impact Conflict Resolution Skills

Teach Students to Pause Before Reacting

Many conflicts escalate because students react immediately.

Encourage students to:

- Stop
- Take a breath
- Think about the situation
- Consider possible responses

Teaching students to pause creates opportunities for better decision-making.

Teach "I" Statements

Students should learn to express feelings without blaming others.

Examples:

Instead of:

- "You always take my stuff!"

Teach:

- "I feel frustrated when my materials are used without permission."

"I" statements help reduce defensiveness and encourage productive conversations.

Teach Active Listening

Students should practice:

- Looking at the speaker
- Listening without interrupting
- Asking clarifying questions
- Restating what they heard

Active listening often prevents conflicts from escalating.

Focus on Solutions

Once both students have shared their perspectives, encourage them to identify possible solutions together.

Conflict Resolution Strategies in Practice

Strategy	What It Supports	Example
Pause and Think	Emotional regulation	Student takes a moment before responding
"I" Statements	Effective communication	Student expresses feelings respectfully
Active Listening	Understanding perspectives	Student repeats what a peer shared
Perspective Taking	Empathy	Student considers how the other person feels
Problem-Solving Discussions	Conflict resolution	Students identify possible solutions together
Adult Facilitation	Skill development	Teacher guides students through a disagreement

These strategies help students develop healthy social problem-solving skills.

Classroom Scenario

Situation

Two students are working together on a science project. One student becomes frustrated because they feel their ideas are being ignored. The student responds by raising their voice and refusing to participate.

The disagreement begins disrupting the group's work.

Teacher Response

The teacher guides both students through a conflict-resolution process:

1. Each student shares their perspective.
2. Students practice active listening.

3. Students identify how their actions affected each other.
4. The group brainstorms possible solutions.
5. Students agree on a plan for moving forward.

Outcome

The students successfully complete the project and gain experience using communication and problem-solving skills to resolve disagreements.

A Simple Conflict Resolution Framework for Students

STEP 1: Stop and Calm Down

- Take a deep breath
- Count to ten
- Use a coping strategy

STEP 2: Explain the Problem

Use respectful language and "I" statements.

STEP 3: Listen to the Other Person

Allow each person to share their perspective without interruption.

STEP 4: Brainstorm Solutions

Ask:

- What can we do to solve this problem?
- What would be fair for both people?

STEP 5: Agree on a Solution

Select a solution both students can accept and follow.

This framework can be posted in classrooms and used during daily interactions.

Teacher Implementation Reflection

When teaching conflict resolution, educators may consider:

- ☐ Are conflict-resolution skills being taught proactively?
- ☐ Do students have opportunities to practice these skills?
- ☐ Are students encouraged to communicate respectfully?
- ☐ Are "I" statements being modeled and reinforced?
- ☐ Are students learning to consider other perspectives?
- ☐ Is conflict viewed as a learning opportunity?
- ☐ Are students developing independence in solving peer disagreements?

Ongoing reflection helps create a classroom culture focused on problem-solving and respect.

Supporting Student Independence and Relationship Skills

Over time, students should be supported in learning to:

- ✓ Recognize their emotions during conflict
- ✓ Communicate respectfully
- ✓ Listen to others' perspectives
- ✓ Use self-regulation strategies
- ✓ Solve problems collaboratively
- ✓ Repair relationships when conflicts occur
- ✓ Advocate for themselves appropriately

These skills help students build positive relationships and navigate social situations successfully.

Connection to IEP Goals and Social-Emotional Development

Conflict-resolution instruction often supports goals related to:

- Social skills
- Emotional regulation
- Communication
- Self-advocacy
- Peer interactions
- Behavioral self-management
- Perspective taking
- Problem-solving

Teaching these skills proactively can reduce behavioral concerns while improving social and academic outcomes.
