

# Southeastern PA School Age Child Care Project



## Coping with Conflicts in After-School Programs by Roberta L. Newman

Roberta Newman is an experienced after-school professional and nationally recognized speaker, trainer, and author of books and videos on after-school care and related topics. For more information, visit Roberta's Web site at [Newroads-Consulting.com](http://Newroads-Consulting.com).

### Set a Positive Tone from the Beginning

Whenever there are two or more people in the same place, there is a potential for disagreement and conflict. Conflict is a natural part of being alive. Even though we may want to avoid it, conflict often provides us with challenges that help us grow, use creativity, exercise self control, and learn how to solve problems. However, we also want to do as much as possible to avoid and prevent unnecessary conflicts. School-age staff can do a lot to prevent unnecessary conflicts:

- ◆ **Create a program environment that is inviting, comfortable, attractive, well-organized, and filled with interesting things to explore and learn about.** Well designed environments help children to be positively and productively engaged in program activities as they interact with each other.
- ◆ **Plan activities that are linked to children's developmental needs and are appropriate for your program setting.** Always ask yourself, "What is the purpose of this activity?" "How will children benefit from the activity?" "How does the activity support their developmental needs and interests?"
- ◆ **Greet each child with a friendly smile every day.** Learn children's names; use names when talking with children.
- ◆ **Talk with children in advance to share ideas for how they can work together in a positive way.** Talk with children about how they would like to be treated. Stress principles and values such as listening to the ideas and concerns of other, sharing, cooperating, showing respect, politeness, kindness, and patience.
- ◆ **Work with children to establish program rules, limits, and consequences everyone agrees to live by.** Remember that when children participate in creating the rules, they are much more likely to live by the rules. Joint rule-making helps children develop a sense of "buy-in" and program ownership.
- ◆ **Recognize that children have varying abilities and skills for handling problems and conflicts.** By keeping these differences in mind, staff can guide children in a way that reduces the possibility of conflict.



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Breakthrough to Quality.....  
A series of articles and training resources from a national leader in out-of-school time.

by Roberta L. Newman

Article 8: Coping with Conflicts in After-School Programs

- ♦ **Keep in mind these DO's and DON'Ts identified by school-age directors in a national survey. Many conflicts arise when staff forget to keep these DO's and DON'Ts in mind:**

DO	DON'T
Smile and have fun with children while you keep them safe.	Leave children alone – unsupervised.
Be nurturing and understanding.	Use negative discipline (delivering “put downs,” yelling at children, getting into power plays, using sarcasm and ridicule to make children feel bad, denying food as punishment, being condescending).
Share your enthusiasm and enjoyment of being with children.	Role model inappropriate behavior (being argumentative; displaying anger and frustration by shouting or throwing things; being rude or disrespectful to children, co-workers, parents, or supervisors).
Remember safety is your #1 goal.	Jump to conclusions about a problem or make assumptions about what children want and need without asking them.
Remember you are a powerful role model for kids. They notice everything you say and do and may copy you later!	Assume that children can take care of all disputes by themselves.
Respect children. Remember the best way to <i>get respect</i> is to <i>give respect</i> .	Stand back passively instead of interacting with children.
Always keep the needs of children in mind.	Take over, failing to let children direct their own activities when they are able and willing to do so.
Be involved with children. Be a DOER, not a WATCHER.	Be inconsistent when applying rules, limits, and consequences.
Talk with children - find out what's on their minds.	Come unprepared to lead an activity.

Remember that children are basically good; yet, some of their choices may not be. One of your main goals is to help them learn about making good choices.

### Teach Children Step-by-Step Problem Solving Strategies

When school-age children learn effective problem solving skills, they develop self confidence and self control that helps them work through conflicts on their own. Children can learn how to use the steps presented in **Illustration I** to solve problems one step at a time. Using these steps helps children develop ownership of their problems and assume a sense of responsibility for their actions. This systematic problem solving process also helps them identify and express their emotions, opinions, and concerns appropriately.

Illustration I. Steps for Effective Problem Solving	
<b>STOP and CALM DOWN</b>	Do whatever it takes to get yourself feeling neutral. Take a few deep breaths. Relax; count to 10. Get a drink of water. Remove yourself from the group and close your eyes for a minute. <b>REMEMBER: No one can use thinking skills to solve a problem or a conflict when they are feeling angry, upset, or hurt.</b>
<b>GET TOGETHER TO FIGURE OUT THE CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM. ASK: What is the problem about?</b>	You may want to take turns describing the problem and sharing your feelings, wants, and opinions related to the problem. Listen without interrupting. Don't talk about <b>solutions</b> until you agree on <b>what the problem is about</b> .
<b>BRAINSTORM IDEAS FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEM.</b>	Make a list of all the <b>possible solutions</b> – practical and impractical. Don't judge yet.
<b>EVALUATE THE IDEAS FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEM</b>	Choose the best idea(s) and use them to <b>plan</b> a course of action.
<b>PUT YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION</b>	Decide on a time and place to check your progress – how is your plan working? Do you need to do anything else?

To learn more about helping children develop problem solving skills and learn how to work through problems and conflicts on their own, see the resources listed at the end of the article.

## Learn to Recognize the Common Cause of Conflicts in School-Age Programs

There are certain problems that occur often in school-age programs. The checklist in **Illustration II** can help staff identify what might be causing conflicts that arise. Once the cause is identified, you can use step-by-step problem solving to correct the situation.

<b>Illustration II. Checklist of Common Causes of Conflicts in School-Age Programs*</b> <i>Use this Checklist to Identify Possible Causes of Conflicts in Your Programs. Be Honest!</i>	
	Inappropriate or poorly planned program activities.
	Inappropriate use of or lack of suitable space, equipment, or supplies.
	Poor handling of transition times – too much waiting between activities.
	Failure to spot or anticipate problems about to happen.
	Lack of understanding of children's needs, resulting in a mismatch between the children's capabilities and the expectations of the programs.
	Personality or temperament clashes among children or between staff and children.
	Overly competitive atmosphere.
	Intolerant/unfriendly atmosphere.
	Poor communication (by children and/or adults who can't or don't express needs appropriately, can't observe, don't know how to listen or refuse to listen).
	Misuse of power by staff – expectations too high, too authoritarian or controlling.
	Too many or unreasonable rules – failure to involve children in shaping rules.
	Absence of problem solving skills.
	Lack of clarity and agreement about what the expectations are, how things are organized, what the limits and boundaries are – among children, staff, and/or parents.

*\*Excerpted and adapted from Roberta L. Newman, Keys to Quality in School-Age Child Care. Union Bridge, MD: Summerwinds Communications, 1993.*

## Tips for Diffusing and Reducing Conflicts When They Do Emerge

It is unrealistic to think that you will be able to eliminate all conflicts in your program. In addition to step-by-step problem solving, the techniques listed in **Illustration III** may be helpful when conflicts begin to emerge. It's important to remember that **no technique** will work in every situation. Staff need to use good judgment in deciding what techniques will work best depending on who is involved, the causes(s) of the conflict, their own capabilities, and the setting.



Illustration III. Techniques Staff Can Use to Diffuse or Reduce Conflict Situations*	
Get your own feelings under control.	Act with firmness and authority if needed. But never vent your anger with children.
Ignore the behavior when small problems occur.	Assume it won't get worse and don't fuel it with your attention.
Intervene immediately if children are in danger of hurting themselves or each other.	Help them find ways to use words to talk through their issues.
Redirect children.	Help children get involved in a different activity. Invite them to help you with a chore. Help them start a new game or move to another area.
Help children withdraw temporarily if they are out of control.	Help them think of ways to cool off and "get themselves together." This is especially helpful when children are very angry, crying, or having a temper tantrum.
Use special signals.	Use eye contact or gestures to alert a child of the need for self control. This is most effective if you and a child have agreed on the special signal in advance.
Move closely to children when you see signs they may be losing control.	Reassure them with your presence that you are there to support and guide them if they need you.
Show interest.	If children look bored, sad, upset, or angry, engage the child in conversation. Tell them you've noticed their feelings. Let them know you are interested in their problems, concerns, fears, ideas, etc.
Use humor.	Make a joke to ease the tension. However, be sure to use humor with sensitivity. Never use humor to make fun of children or to minimize their serious problems or concerns.
Give assistance.	Offer help and support when children might not understand directions or feel frustrated.
Change the routine.	Break the tension with a change of pace if an inappropriate activity or schedule seems to be causing the problem or making it worse.
Remove objects that cause problems.	Put away or move objects, equipment or materials that seem to bring out negative behavior and provoke conflicts.

\*Excerpted and adapted from Roberta L. Newman, *Keys to Quality in School-Age Child Care*. Union Bridge, MD: Summerwinds Communications, 1993.

## Become Aware of Your Conflict Management Style

Most of us have developed a style for dealing with conflicts in our lives:

- ◆ Some routinely **ignore** conflicts.
- ◆ Some always try to **accommodate** other people and smooth things over if at all possible. If we do this too often, we may find we are giving up on things we really care about.
- ◆ Some tend to **look for compromises**, taking the attitude that if you give up something, I will too. An over emphasis on compromising can mean that no one every wins – instead we all lose a little.
- ◆ Some want to work things out so that everybody wins all the time. They spend a lot of time trying to **collaborate** as a way of resolving conflicts. With collaboration, everybody wins, but it may take a lot of time to get to the solution.
- ◆ Some take a hard line position. When they're right, they're right! They maintain a position of **authority and control**, no matter what!

Take a minute to think about your own style of managing conflicts. Do you use one style much more than others? Do you vary between one or two styles? Do you use some styles a lot and others not at all? Conflict management experts have learned that **no conflict management style is appropriate for every situation. It all depends on who's involved, how**

**people are feeling, the skills of the conflict manager, and what is happening in the situation.**

As you work with school-age children, try to become aware of your own style of responding to conflicts when they arise. If you think you would like to know more about conflict management and how to develop the skills to use different styles, consult the following books: *Creative Conflict Resolution* and *Adventures in Peacemaking*, which are listed under resources at the end of the article.

### Ask for Help with Difficult Problems and Conflicts

Used consistently and appropriately, the suggestions and techniques in this article will help you provide positive guidance and resolve problems and conflicts effectively in most situations. However, there may be situations which you are not able to handle effectively. Or you may feel you don't know how to respond effectively to children who exhibit extremely challenging behavior or intense anger. It's very important for staff to ask for help when they feel this way. By problem-solving with a supervisor or colleague, you may recognize the need for additional training on how to handle difficult situations. It may also become evident that it's time to contact special resource people in the community who can provide support for a child or family experiencing extreme difficulties.

### Use a Comprehensive Approach to Managing and Responding to Conflict

By themselves, none of the strategies included in this article provide THE answer to managing and responding to conflicts effectively. But taken together, they can help staff significantly reduce conflict in school-age programs. To summarize, here are the components of a comprehensive approach to coping with conflict:

- ◆ *Be systematic about using effective strategies to set a positive tone with children from the beginning.*
- ◆ *Learn about and teach children step-by-step problem solving strategies.*

- ◆ *Learn to recognize common causes of conflicts in school-age programs.*
- ◆ *Become skilled at using a variety tips for diffusing and reducing conflicts when they emerge.*
- ◆ *Identify your conflict management style and learn to use different styles effectively.*
- ◆ *Remember to ask for help when conflicts become too challenging to handle alone.*

### RESOURCES

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## TRAINING RESOURCE: TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

### Questions to Think and Talk About

- 1- What proactive steps do you currently take to prevent conflicts in your program?
  
- 2- When and where do conflicts arise most often in your program? What are the common causes of these conflicts?
  
- 3- What actions could staff take to reduce conflicts in your program?
  
- 4- What is your personal conflict management style? How is your style working for you? What changes, if any, would you like to make to improve your ability to manage conflicts?
  
- 5- What resources are available to you when you are confronted with difficult problems and conflicts? What additional resources would help you manage conflicts more effectively?

### Learning Activities-

- 1- Think of a typical conflict situation in your program. Refer to the step-by-step problem solving chart in this article. Develop a detailed plan for using this step-by-step method to work through the problem you identified.
  
- 2- Review the *Checklist of Common Causes of Conflict in School-Age Programs* in this article. Check the causes that occur in your program. Discuss ways to reduce or eliminate the causes you checked. Then, identify any other causes of conflict in your program and explore ways to address them
  
- 3- Share scenarios of children who present challenging behavior in your program. Refer to **Illustration III: Techniques Staff Can Use to Diffuse or Reduce Conflict Situations** in this article. Discuss which techniques would be most effective with children in each scenario and why.