

# Conflict Resolution

*By Bev Bos*

The most important thing to remember about discipline for young children is that it needs to be kind, tender and humane. And so often it is not. Why are adults so afraid of being kind when disciplining? I think there are lots of reasons: one reason stems from how we were disciplined as children. In a tense moment we often go back to how we were raised even if we resented how we were treated. Fear, also, keeps us from being kind and tender because we are so afraid that our child will become a rude, hurtful, out of control adult. Sometimes we just don't know a better way.

Part of the way adults react has to do with the world we live in and the uncertainty adults face everyday about the future. A few years ago life followed a predictable pattern of school, job, marriage, home and family. Since the 1960's social upheaval, out of control financial worries and simplification of divorce procedures have created new patterns of living, mating and child rearing. There are anxieties about drugs, sex, crime (it is predicted that one out of every three jobs by the year 2000 will be in security) and unstable family life. Confused by shattered traditions and searching for immediate solutions, adults are caught up in the vicious circle of trying to change their children instead of changing the conditions that pose the real threat.

Often adults convey anger and disappointment to children. Children are anxious to please adults and really, really want to do the right thing. But instead of giving encouragement, too often we reprimand them with put downs and punishments. Adults frequently talk down to their children, they are demanding and rude. They often treat children in a way they would never treat another adult. When we threaten children we:

- \* model for children how to be an angry, yelling person who humiliates others

- \* have children who, having been made to feel that they are genuinely bad people, may act that way

- \* Teach them how to freeze up, lowering their own expectations of discovery and success in order to stay out of the line of fire

- \* Have children who have been made to feel that the adults in their lives are enemies. We fight enemies. They will IMITATE the harsh disciplinary behavior of the adults in all their relationships. A golden rule to remember: "What I want for myself, I must also want for you; what I want from you I must also be willing to give." Think of your children as royal guests in your home. In many ways, they are, because they come and stay only for a short while. What they remember when they leave affects them and their loved ones forever. So when you talk to children:

- \* Always be sure you have their full attention. Get down on your knees and speak firmly but quietly

- \* Keep it simple, say what you mean. Do not pose a question (Why did you hit your brother?) but state what you can't let happen. "I can't let you hit your brother. When you hit it hurts."

\* You might have the aggressor look at the face of the hurt child so they begin to look for non-verbal clues. Remember, children are developmentally egocentric until they are six. It is difficult if not impossible for them to understand another point of view. That's why they have parents to help them. The contorted face of a two-year old can sometimes scare a seasoned adult.

\* Do not badger the child but encourage conversation. "Tell me what you think I said."

\* Please don't hurry the child. So often problems come up when you are going out the door, or in the grocery store, or trying to get dinner on the table, etc. We whiz in and yell and holler and the child doesn't feel understood.

This article would have to be ten pages long to give you answers to all the questions you have. What follows are a few important things to pay attention to.

When the conflict is between two children, do not let children be victims. When one child comes whining, instead of attacking the other child because yours got hurt, a better way is to help your child tell the other child what they do not like. Check first to see if the child is physically hurt, holding them and consoling -- then ask, "Did you like that?" And, "What would like to say to Michael?" Take the child by the hand, stand by for support and help your child begin the most important thing they can do -- communicate with words how they feel and what they don't like. And remember, for goodness sakes, that this kind of conflict resolution takes more than once, it takes TIME. But it is a gift which pays enormous dividends. You cannot hold your child's hand throughout their life so the earlier you help them learn how to resolve conflict without inflicting physical pain the more productive and happy their lives will be. Let me give you a four step plan for helping children resolve conflict.

1. Take the hand, firmly, of the child who is hurt and go find the other child. Hold the hand of the other child and say, "Emily, tell Julie how you feel." Then, "Julie, tell Emily how you feel." Now, do it again -- they always have more to say. Do not interrupt the children and do not put words in their mouths. You want them to develop the skills to communicate.

2. Next, say to each child, "Anything else?" Provide ample time for each child to respond. If one child interrupts, very calmly respond, "Emily isn't through."

3. "Give me three solutions? How can we solve this problem? How could this be different?" This sounds very sophisticated for little kids but you would be surprised at how quickly they get the idea when adults are supportive. Sometimes a child's solution will be punitive like, "Well, I could hit her!" At this point, without raising your voice, you say, "That's not an acceptable solution." Always go for three solutions.

All of us lose it occasionally. Children and adults let anger get beyond control. Sometimes it happens when we are tired, hurried and frustrated with our busy days. If adults could practice these four steps of resolving conflict with their spouses -- holding hands, give each other time to respond, look for solutions and hug each other instead of yelling and hurting each other with words that can never be taken back and seem to be remembered long after the conflict, what a wonderful world this would be. Impossible, you say? Nothing is impossible. It just takes a different way of thinking.