Making Peace with Toddler Conflict

•Trice Atchison

Conflict is inherently distressing for all but the thickest-skinned among us. And, yet, there is a subset of people who seem, in contrast, to be enlivened by conflict. Perhaps humanity can achieve a healthy balance — one that can be learned beginning in early childhood — in which conflict is neither eschewed nor ignited, but is instead met with understanding and finesse. In this article, I hope to shed some light on this age-old challenge and, perhaps, offer some tools that may help us and our children deal more successfully with this inevitable aspect of life.

> A typical progression for new parents: *We have a child, and our hearts are melted. We're vulnerable, and so is our newborn. We try our best to shelter this innocent child, who grows fast and soon becomes a part of the wider world. We bring him to a playgroup, the park or a library read-along. The other new parents seem friendly enough, if also a little nervous, and the children happily observe and participate in the activities. This is healthy, this is good, this is peace, this is community.*
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> *And then a little boy, not more than two and for no apparent reason, reaches out to pull a tuft of our own child's hair. Hard! Unprovoked! Our child yells in protest. We are shocked and dismayed. This is not what we had in mind. We want a perfect, conflict-free world for our deeply loved child. No hair pulling, no hitting, no teasing, no excluding! These thoughts cloud the present moment, and we lose all perspective.*

Fledgling parents often seek a utopian experience for their child, and this can be especially true among parents drawn to Waldorf education. Many parents speak of the visceral reaction they had the first time they ever walked into a Waldorf early childhood classroom — the peach-blossom lazured walls, the simple cloth dolls and wooden toys, the fresh flowers on the seasonal table, and the smell of bread baking in the oven. Parents rejoice: *This is it! I've found a Garden of Eden for my child.*

I, too, was enthralled with the goodness and beauty I sensed the first time I entered a Waldorf nursery, and knew that this was the setting I wanted for my child. I still hold these positive views about a form of education that is healing, inspiring, developmentally appropriate and joyful. The difference now is that I know from experience that conflict and struggle also occur within those pastel-colored walls. We are, after all, still here on Earth.

Utopia is not ideal

As parents, we can strive to offer our children valuable experiences we may have enjoyed, or missed, as children, but we cannot surround them with perfect harmony. Even if we could achieve this end, we would not be serving our child's best interests. As Barbara Ehrensaft says in *Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents Are Giving Children Too Much, But Not What They Need,* "In human relationships, the act of reparation, making good on something that did not initially go well, is far better for character building than providing our children with a conflict-free, idyllic, 'perfect' childhood" (Ehrensaft, 238). Sometimes there's trouble in paradise. What's more, this trouble is normal, and a valuable learning experience for all of us as we help children navigate their way through conflict. To do this, we must become more aware of the feelings and preconceptions we bring to conflicts that we and our children encounter, and strive to be more objective and present in regard to whatever manifests in the moment.

Certain trends in parenting can make this objectivity toward and acceptance of conflict all the more difficult to achieve. These trends include: the blurring of boundaries between parent and child, especially common during the early years; an overzealous desire on the part of parents to offer their children an "optimal" childhood; and an overblown fear of conflict of any kind in the name of peace. In these ways, parents may be hampering their children in learning how to co-exist with others. As teachers and parents, we can help children build character and important life skills by accepting conflict ourselves as a normal part of toddlerhood, childhood and adult life. As psychoanalyst and pediatrician D.W. Winnicott said, "If society is in danger, it is not because of man's aggressiveness, but because of the repression of personal aggressiveness in individuals" (Ehrensaft, 187). In other words, an extreme aversion to, and lack of acceptance of, aggression as part of life — and a corresponding inability to address conflict — can actually lead to distorted forms of aggression that can harm individuals, families and the whole social fabric. Further, the lack of authenticity that accompanies this denial of aggression can result in children and adults who suffer from depression, anxiety and other ailments. We had better get a handle on this natural phenomenon, so that our classrooms and communities are not filled with children whose well-meaning parents and teachers are unwittingly creating turmoil, as with the child, Richard, described here:

> *Pamela and Gordon believed that a crying child meant a failing parent. As a small baby, their son, Richard, was given a warm and enriched environment. He had two parents who anticipated his every need and quietly removed obstacles from his course before he ever knew they were in his way . . . He had a bucolic and blissful first couple of years . . . His parents remained attuned to his every need. Richard smiled most of the time . . .*
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> *But then it was time for Richard to attend preschool. Nirvana quickly turned to purgatory. Pamela and Gordon [had] failed to present their son with the 'gradual failures' that would allow him to function in the world. . . . [Richard's] conflict-free home life existed in stark contrast to his new battlefield at school. Soon the battles were carried home . . . In the concerted effort to keep Richard satisfied and gratified, Richard was deprived of the basic tools that would help him cope in the world — patience, waiting his turn, dealing with frustration, problem solving, hoping for something better* (Ehrensaft, 163-4).

The unhappy situation described above begins in infancy, with the parents quietly clearing Richard's path of all obstacles. He never has to experience frustration or exert himself to solve a problem on his own — even one as simple as retrieving a toy he has flung out of reach. This practice starkly contrasts with the RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) approach to young children, which discourages parents and caregivers from intervening too soon in a misguided effort to smooth a baby's path of obstacles. As RIE founder Magda Gerber writes in *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to encourage your child's natural abilities — from the very start,* "To respect your child is to create a little distance so that you refrain from interfering with her experience of encountering life . . . RIE's respectful approach encourages a child's authenticity, or genuineness" (Gerber, 3-4).

In this light, creating a frustration-free environment for a young child can be viewed as a form of disrespect — one that alienates the child from her truest self. Of course we are meant to protect and nurture our young children; but when we strive for the impossible goal of eliminating even small upsets and challenges — wanting everything to be easy and happy all the time — we can create a sense of helplessness in the child that keeps her from developing confidence in her own strength and emerging abilities. This sense of helplessness can cast a veil of uncertainty over her interactions with life, and is, in fact, an untrue assessment of all she really is capable of doing.

Approaches to addressing conflict among children

Waldorf early childhood teachers have often successfully used redirection as an approach to resolving conflicts among children. When Sally and Sammy are each insisting on using a child's broom at the same time, the teacher might get the dustpan and brush and show one of the children how to sweep up the dirt. Or she may encourage Sammy to bake some muffins in the play kitchen. This occurs without a long speech about the importance of sharing, or a dictate that each child must take a turn of a certain length with the broom before switching. Sarah Baldwin, author of *Nurturing Children and Families: One Model of a Parent/Child Program in a Waldorf School,* specifically reminds parents to be aware that children this young often simply cannot share, and recommends that parents and teachers work together to redirect children (Baldwin, 89).

The strong, healthy daily rhythm of a Waldorf classroom can do much to help prevent or minimize conflicts. The rhythm helps children to know what to expect, to transition smoothly from one activity to the next, and to avoid becoming over-stimulated or bored (conditions that can prompt conflict). Waldorf early childhood teacher Barbara Patterson, in *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing our Children from Birth to Seven,* says, "Like a heartbeat or the rising and setting of the sun, our classroom rhythms hold children in a secure balance. Our outer activity comes to meet whatever wells up within the children as we move through repetitive daily and weekly rhythms" (Patterson and Bradley, 119). The flow of activities each day is carefully thought out to allow for a natural "breathing in" and "breathing out" of focus and energy. Ronald G. Morrish, author of *Secrets of Discipline: 12 Keys for Raising Responsible Children,* supports this practice. He describes the need for children to have a healthy dose of rhythm and routine in their lives in order to avoid feeling off-balance and unharmonious: "These days, many [children] have to think their way through every part of the day. Many parents no longer stress routines and nothing is predictable. Children have to stay alert and deal with constant change . . . Too often, we forget that children struggle to get through days like this the same as we do. They also become agitated, irritable and unproductive" (Morrish, 57-8).

Additional wise strategies effective in minimizing conflict include a hearty mid-morning snack (heading off problems that can arise from simple hunger), and encouraging early bedtimes and daily naps to help ensure that children are well-rested. It is up to us as adults to create an atmosphere that, as far as possible, fosters peace and purposefulness — and, of course, to model peace ourselves. It is not helpful to toddlers or to children of any age to be placed in situations that cause undue stress and confusion, in which the children never know what to expect. A well-rested, well-fed, assured and engaged child will tend to play well by herself and co-exist well with others. But, as we know, even in such positive circumstances, conflicts crop up. Children also bring with them varying levels of coping skills from day to day; these can be due to simple overtiredness or other temporary factors, constitutional differences, and issues children may be absorbing from their family life, such as parents' marital difficulties or job pressures.

Patterson suggests various options for dealing with aggression and conflict when they occur in the classroom:

> *A child who bites can be given a large piece of apple or carrot and must sit beside the teacher to eat it. "We bite the carrot, not our friends." For a child who scratches, bring out the healing basket and trim the child's nails. "Kittens scratch, but not children." A child who spits may be taken to the bathroom to spit into the toilet* (Patterson and Bradley, 119).

Patterson also recommends listening carefully to children as they describe what happened in a conflict with another child, noting that a child who feels sincerely heard seems better able to let go of the conflict and move on. She also helps children struggling to enter social play in finding creative ways to become involved, increasing the chances that the other children will respond favorably to a new playmate. For example, a child of kindergarten age might be encouraged to knock on a neighbor's "door," basket in hand, to say that she's having visitors for tea and would like to borrow some dishes, as opposed to crashing in on the dish hoarders, accusing them of being unfair (Patterson and Bradley, 119).

RIE practitioners advocate more specifically and directly guiding children engaged in conflict.

First, however, children must have a chance to work out conflicts on their own — with just enough adult help as is needed to lead them through an impasse. In this way (as with the infant trying to reach a toy on his own) children's capabilities and competence are acknowledged as they gradually gain mastery in dealing with their physical world and social relationships. Gerber says:

> *I believe in letting children struggle over a toy as long as neither one is getting hurt or hasn't reached a point where he is past his limit of coping with the situation. Struggle is part of life, all aspects of life. There is a famous Hungarian stage play called* The Tragedy of Man. *In one scene God looks down and speaks to Adam and Eve, saying, "Struggle and keep hoping"* (Gerber 188-9).

Gerber's words bring to mind images of a woman laboring through childbirth, a chick pecking its way out of a shell, a sperm's journey during conception — all examples of rich and necessary struggle.

A helpful learning tool from RIE

A RIE-based article by Denise Da Ros and Beverly Kovach, "Assisting Toddlers and Caregivers During Conflict Resolutions: Interactions That Promote Socialization," offers specific guidelines for caregivers in dealing with toddler conflict and in exploring one's own inner response to conflict in terms of how it might influence the way a caregiver chooses to intervene (Da Ros and Kovach 29). The first step is quiet observation, maintaining an open and nonjudgmental attitude. Moving in close to the conflict and remaining at the children's eye level, the caregiver watches and waits, unless, of course, a child's safety is at stake (all the while ready to intercept any hitting gesture). The caregiver may then describe to the children what she sees ("I see that you have the sheep, Thomas, and that Sarah wants it, too."). The caregiver, curbing her desire to quickly solve the problem out of a need to erase her own discomfort, waits to see whether the children, thus acknowledged, still need to struggle. She offers just enough involvement, if any, to help the children solve the problem themselves. Often the simple act of moving in close, or of simply stating to the children what is happening, is enough to dispel the conflict. The caregiver stays nearby until the conflict is resolved, remaining available to comfort either child, and modeling gentleness toward both the "aggressor" and the "victim" (she does not actually view the children in terms of these limiting labels). The caregiver continues to verbalize what she sees happening until the toddlers disengage. Da Ros and Kovach conclude that "Adults' ways of relating and responding during toddler conflict will affect the immediate outcome of toddler problem-solving. When and how much adults should intervene, and the kinds of strategy they select, will affect the authenticity and competence of the toddlers who are in the adult's care" (Da Ros and Kovach, 30).

As Gerber, with her customary common sense, states, "If either child's emotions reach the boiling point and his behavior falls apart, or either child is intent on engaging in aggressively hurtful behavior like hitting or biting, you may decide to separate them. You can say, 'I don't want either of you to get hurt, and it looks like one of you might. I'm going to separate you now' " (Gerber, 190).

The Da Ros and Kovach article was especially helpful to me in practically dealing with classroom conflicts that occurred during parent-toddler classes I have taught at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School. In classes that consist of up to eight parent-toddler pairs each day, with children ages one-and-a-half to four, conflict sometimes arises. In preparation for writing this article, I practiced the steps outlined above, and also took a closer look at my own deep discomfort with conflict, and with the mistaken idea that, ideally, there *wouldn't* be any in the classroom, or that a "good teacher" knows how to remove conflict in a snap. The insight to see conflicts as necessary and educational — and to question the wisdom of desiring an entirely conflict-free environment — helped me to become more effective in assisting the children and parents.

Practical applications

At the initial signs of conflict, I would move in closer. When warranted, I "reported" to the children, in simple language, what I saw. I was amazed at how affirming and calming these steps could be for the children. The feeling of "Ah, she understands," was palpable. At times, redirection still felt like the more appropriate response for such young children — but I also could more clearly observe how parents' overly enthusiastic attempts at redirection often backfired and, indeed, did not adequately acknowledge the child's feelings of frustration, inevitably leading to further frustration and conflict. (Perhaps the child thinks, "Why is she asking me to make muffins? Can't she see that I really want that broom?!") With empathy, I also was able to observe how uncomfortable some of the parents were with conflict in the classroom, particularly when their own child was involved in it.

I began to tell "victims," in a matter-of-fact manner, that they could say "No," or "I don't like that," when another child was invading their space. Years ago, I read a magazine article by a rape survivor who wrote about having been raised to be a "good girl" who never said no or wished to hurt anybody's feelings by refuting them, setting limits, or "making a stink." These learned habits of so-called "niceness" were the conditions that led to her rape. This harkens back to Gerber's goal of authenticity. It is simply false, unnatural, and even dangerous to smile apologetically and remain accommodating when someone is violating your personal space.

I wrote a letter on the topic of toddler conflict to the parents, and gave them a copy of the Da Ros and Kovach article. The parents joked good-naturedly when I mentioned the topic, "Oh, toddler conflict, we don't know *anything* about that!" Over the next weeks I saw the parents (and myself) develop greater comfort and skill in observing conflicts in process, allowing them some time to be resolved, and quietly acknowledging what was transpiring when a conflict was in effect. Of course, the children and parents were also by this time more familiar with me, each other, the classroom and our rhythm, but even considering these other factors, happy, peaceful play clearly increased as the weeks went on, in part due to the new awareness the adults were bringing to the classroom. Together we strived to refrain from distracting a child away from a conflict too soon or from trying to make the children "happy" by swooping in with a ready solution. If I noticed trouble escalating while I was busy with snack preparations and parents were occupied with their craft and conversation, I could say, "I think the children in the play kitchen may need to have an adult nearby," and one of the parents would get up, move in close, and be ready to respond or intervene as needed. Conflicts occurred less frequently in the final weeks, and there were no longer any full-blown struggles. A number of parents commented on how helpful they found the letter and article to be.

It's interesting to note that when spouses or other caregivers (such as a grandmother or nanny) would occasionally accompany a child to class in place of the parent who came regularly (and, therefore, was more likely to have read previous hand-outs), the more typical approach to conflicts began to be more noticeable to me. These strategies included trying to quickly solve the problem for the child, seeing one child as the aggressor, the other as the victim, or trying to "jolly" the child out of her frustration. The contrast in approaches indicated that we really had managed to begin changing the general classroom culture in this regard, with occasional lapses into old patterns. The group had, by this time, more information on the topic of toddler conflict and regular practice with our new approach.

RIE's emphasis on asking adults to notice and explore their own feelings and responses — while simultaneously keeping them in check — is key to this process. In short, allowing the conflicts to occur with less parental and teacher discomfort and less quick intervention, and verbalizing problems as they occurred, had the effect of noticeably increasing peaceful play within the classroom over time.

This "sports-casting" to the children differs from the traditional Waldorf approach, in which the teacher is urged to speak less and model more, to quietly and "behind the scenes" create a healing and peaceful environment, to indirectly address certain themes through story-telling and puppetry, and to show the children more acceptable ways to interact. However, my own direct experience and observations with the RIE approach to toddler conflict, as well as the parents' positive remarks and follow-through, convince

me of its worth and appropriateness within the classroom, in addition to the more traditional, and deeply valuable, approaches to conflict within a Waldorf early childhood classroom.

Overcoming our "harmony addiction"

Kim Payne — a psychologist and former Waldorf teacher who lectures worldwide on parenting, education and social issues — is opening new areas of inquiry within Waldorf schools by encouraging a more direct approach to conflicts among children of all ages. During a lecture entitled "When Push Comes to Love: How to Raise Civilized Children in an Uncivilized World," Payne said: "As adults, we need to get over our 'harmony addiction' and develop policies both at home and at school for dealing with conflict in a more straightforward way." He, too, urges us to embrace conflict — not to immediately separate children when they are arguing, but to help them work it out so that they can develop a sense of who they are in relation to others.

Sharifa Oppenheimer is another advocate for teaching children conflict resolution skills. In her book, *Heaven on Earth: A Handbook for Parents of Young Children*, she says, "It will require us to take our own emotions in hand and work with ourselves, not only to model justice, but also to shed light on human dynamics and creative problem-solving at an early age. . . . [When guiding children,] there are three essential elements to remember. 1) Use the same tone of voice you use for 'here's the towel.' Simple, informative, clear. 2) Rarely is there a situation in which there is a true 'victim' and 'aggressor.' There are two sides to every child's disagreement, and you need to know both. 3) Keep it simple. A few words used skillfully are far more effective than the best lecture on justice and equality" (Oppenheimer, 202).

My interest in how to handle toddler conflict has prompted me to begin studying the topic of conflict resolution more generally, and to engage in a more in-depth exploration of my own knee-jerk reactions to, and feelings about, conflict. Toward this end, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* by Marshall B. Rosenberg is a valuable book that could have remarkably healing effects on individuals, families and organizations taking up the practices it outlines. The language and communication skills described are meant to strengthen our ability to remain open, human, authentic and responsive even in challenging situations. Rosenberg prompts us to abandon our habits of blaming, judging, retreating, threatening and pigeon-holing. Instead, he invites us to compassionately work our way through conflicts by observing our feelings, realizing our needs and calmly making requests. His nonviolent communication process (NVC) has been used with much success in situations ranging from family and relationship problems, to community-wide conflicts, to political strife on a global scale (Rosenberg, 8). The steps Rosenberg outlines can feel stilted and scripted at first, but, honestly, the world could use a helping hand in the form of a beginning script as we all gain practice with new and healthier ways of relating.

Hope for the future

As Morrish wrote, "A few years from now, our children will be in charge of our country and our communities . . . They will be responsible for looking after the environment, preventing wars, and educating a new generation of children. How well our children do in the years to come will, to a great extent, be determined by how well we raise them now" (Morrish, 141).

Our own discomfort with conflict and desire to squelch it can have a profound ripple effect into the future, leading to more complex problems. Like the children who have the potential to grow through conflict, if we let them, we all can benefit from learning the tools that lead to conflict resolution. With practice, we can become worthy examples to our own children, to the children in our classrooms and their parents, and to our communities — as we learn to make peace with conflict.

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