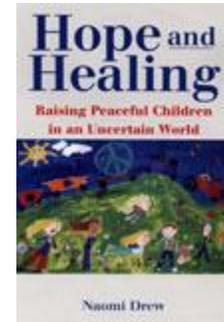


Six Steps for Resolving Conflicts

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Here's how you can use the Win/Win Guidelines for any conflicts that may arise :

Step 1: Cool off.

Conflicts can't be solved in the face of hot emotions. Take a step back, breathe deep, and gain some emotional distance before trying to talk things out. As success coach Natalie Gahrman says, "When I take the time to breathe and regain my focus I can create the opportunity to choose my response rather than just react. If I try to skip this step, my words are too emotionally loaded."

Take a moment to brainstorm ten things that make you feel better when you're hot under the collar. Consider some of the following: breathing deeply while making a calming statement, looking at the sky, clearing your desk or straightening up, splashing cold water on the face, writing in a journal, or taking a quick walk and then coming back to talk about the problem. Some people need physical release, while others need something quiet and cerebral. Determine what works for you, then use it next time you get angry. Then you'll be ready to go on to the next step.

Step 2: Tell what's bothering you using "I messages."

"I messages" are a tool for expressing how we feel without attacking or blaming. By starting from "I" we take responsibility for the way we perceive the problem. This is in sharp contrast to "you messages" which put others on the defensive and close doors to communication. A statement like, "You've left the kitchen a mess again! Can't you ever clean up after yourself?" will escalate the conflict. Now take a look at how differently an "I message comes across: "I'm annoyed because I thought we agreed you'd clean up the kitchen after using it. What happened?"

When making "I" statements it's important to avoid put-downs, guilt-trips, sarcasm, or negative body language. We need to come from a place inside that's non-combative and

willing to compromise. A key credo in conflict resolution is, “It’s us against the problem, not us against each other.” “I messages” enable us to convey this.

Step 3: Each person restates what they heard the other person say.

Reflective listening demonstrates that we care enough to hear the other person out, rather than just focusing on our own point of view. It actually fosters empathy. Mark Burnes describes how he used reflective listening the time he walked into the middle of a shouting match between his ex-wife and teen-aged son.

“No sooner had I walked in the door to pick up Randy than he and his mother erupted into battle. In the past I might have shouted for them to stop, only to have been drawn into the fray. Instead I took a deep breath, gathered my thoughts, and chose my words carefully. I calmly asked them each if they could tell me what had happened. Then I reflected back what they said. My willingness to listen helped them listen too. They were actually able to come to a compromise, something I’d never before thought possible.”

Step 4: Take responsibility.

In the majority of conflicts, both parties have some degree of responsibility. However, most of us tend blame rather than looking at our own role in the problem. When we take responsibility we shift the conflict into an entirely different gear, one where resolution is possible.

Fifty-two year old Nancy Martin talked about how taking responsibility averted a major falling-out with her husband. “We were getting ready to go to a family gathering, and as usual I was running late. When my husband Bill spotted me puttering around in the living room, he completely lost it. At the sound of his angry voice, I responded defensively, and then we were on our way to an ugly confrontation.

But this time, instead of going into my defensive posture I walked away for a few minutes, took some deep breaths, and got my bearings. When I walked back into the room I was able to hear him out. Bill told me that he was so frustrated at having to wait for me whenever we went out. He also spoke about punctuality as something he highly valued. As I listened to his words a funny thing happened: I realized he was right. I did need to get a handle on my habitual lateness. It was then that I apologized. My husband ended up giving me a hug and thanking me. What might have become a full-blown fight actually turned into a moment of drawing closer.

Step 5: Brainstorm solutions and come up with one that satisfies both people.

Resolving conflicts is a creative act. There are many solutions to a single problem. The key is a willingness to seek compromises.

Kindergarten teacher Connie Long describes how her students started having fewer conflicts when they learned how to brainstorm solutions: “My kids were constantly getting into arguments over crayons, erasers, toys, you name it. After introducing peacemaking my students started finding ways to solve the problem instead of just getting stuck in their own positions. For example, when Ronnie and Jamie both grabbed the yellow truck, I took them

aside and asked if they could come up with five ways to solve the problem. They thought about it and then suggested taking turns, sharing, getting another truck from the toy chest, doing a different activity, and building a truck together out of Legos. This is the kind of thinking I'm seeing more and more. Brainstorming has opened my children's mind to new possibilities.

Step 6: Affirm, forgive, or thank.

A handshake, hug, or kind word gives closure to the resolution of conflicts. Forgiveness is the highest form of closure. Minister Fredrick Buechner says, "When you forgive somebody . . . you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each others' presence." What a legacy we can leave to our children as we teach and model this.

Just saying thank you at the end of a conflict, or acknowledging the person for working things out sends a message of conciliation and gratitude. We preserve our relationships this way, strengthening our connections and working through problems that arise.

Conflict resolution has applications in every walk of life.

As a police officer described: "Knowing conflict resolution has helped me come from a base of understanding no matter who I'm dealing with. Instead of just reacting, I calm myself and listen to what people have to say. If people feel like you understand, they tend to become less volatile."

A graduate student dealing with room-mate difficulties: "I told my roommate what was on my mind and asked him to do the same. We listened to each others' point of view. By talking it out we gained empathy toward one another. The resolution came as we began to understand each others feelings."

A teacher in conflict with a colleague over the use of space: "When I expressed my point of view through "I messages" without placing blame, we were able to come up with a fair solution, a compromise we could both live with.

A mother of a three year-old : In the past, the fiery look in my son's eyes would put me right over the edge. It would lead to a screaming match, marking the beginning of a very bad day. Now I breathe deeply, make a calming statement, and remind myself not to yell. I use "I messages" too. "You messages" tend to inflame him. For example, if he refuses to dress I might say, "I'll put your clothes right here. As soon as you're dressed you can have breakfast with us." It's working; the power struggles are lessening.

A ten year-old boy: My little brother started cutting off the ribbons on my helium balloons. I was furious! Instead of going after him, I went upstairs, cooled off, and came back when I felt calmer. I gave him an "I message: "I'm really upset about what you did to my balloons. You wouldn't like it if I did that to something of yours!" I said it in a such respectful way my brother was shocked. He said, "I'm really sorry. Would you help me fix

them?”

Think of your own life. Who are you in conflict with? Imagine applying this system to work things out. Think of the impact on all your relationships. Peace starts with each of us and sometimes we need to take the first step. As Gandhi once said, “We must be the change we wish to see in others.”

Naomi Drew is recognized around the world as an expert on conflict resolution and peacemaking in schools and homes. Hailed as visionary, her work has enabled educators, parents, and people of all ages to live together more cooperatively.

Her work has been recognized by educational leaders throughout the country. People of all ages have attested to durable changes in their relationships after applying the principles Drew outlines. Her work has been featured in magazines, newspapers, radio, and TV and she currently serves as a parenting expert for “Classroom Close-ups,” a public television show.

