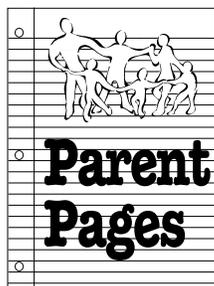


# Children Can Use a Win-Win Model to Solve Conflicts



You name it - space, possessions, privileges - kids will fight over just about anything. There are days when family life feels like a cauldron of conflicts constantly at a boil.

There is another way. Parents can teach children the rules of the social world by following a sequence of easy steps called social problem solving. With enough practice, children will learn to use these techniques to handle conflicts on their own.

It's helpful to remember that the physical fighting of young children occurs because they have no better tools for expressing their desires and feelings. Keep in mind that those desires and feelings are legitimate. To authentically resolve a conflict, desires and feelings must be respected and addressed to each child's satisfaction.

Imagine it's Monday, 8:30 a.m., and nine year old Sue is rushing out the door. As she grabs her school bag, Sue notices that her three year old sister, Annie, is holding a pack of her cards that she'd left on the living room floor.

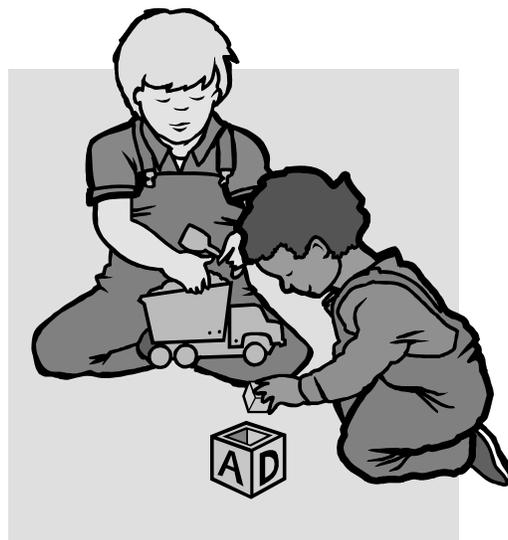
Sue: "Give me those cards, they're mine!"

Annie: "Mine!"

Back and forth they go, getting ever more entrenched in this face off, each one's anger rising.

## What can a parent do?

**Step #1 - Say, "There's a problem here,"** and ask each child what the problem is, giving each a turn to talk and requiring the other to listen. (Sometimes a cool down period is necessary between the intervention and children being able to talk to and listen to each other.)



Parent: "What's the problem?"

Sue: "I want the cards back, they're mine!"

Annie: "I want them!"

**Step #2 - Ask each child follow up questions** to help each explain their point of view more specifically.

Parent: "What do you think will happen if Annie has the cards?"

Sue: "She'll wreck them."

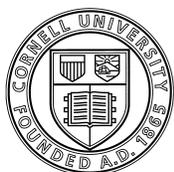
Parent: "Annie, why do you want the cards?"

Annie: "I want to count them."

Parent: "Are you going to wreck your big sister's cards?"

Annie: "No, I'm gonna count them."

~Continued~



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**Step #3 - Restate what the problem is**, naming what each child wants, using the details the above discussion has brought out.

Parent to Annie: "Sue wants her cards back. She's afraid you'll wreck them."

Parent to Sue: "Annie wants to count the cards and she says she won't wreck them."

**Step #4 - Ask children for their ideas** of how they each can get what they want. When a young child is involved you may need to suggest a solution.

Parent to Sue: "Would it be OK if Annie counted the cards? Then what should she do with them?" Sue: "Put them on top of the piano."

Parent to Annie: "Sue says you can count the cards, but afterward you must put them up on the piano."

Annie: "OK."

Parent to Sue: "I'll make sure she doesn't wreck the cards and puts them where you asked."

Parent to Annie: "I'm sure you'll handle the cards carefully. I know you can be gentle."

**Step #5 - A parent must be there to follow through** by overseeing that the agreement is kept by the younger child.

In this scenario children get to state what they want and a resolution is built from a clear understanding of one another's point of view. Nobody's desires or feelings get denied here.

What if Sue didn't relent because of a recent experience when Annie was careless with her property? Back in Step #4 the parent could say to Annie: "Sue remembers the last time you ripped up her cards and she doesn't want you to have these cards right now. She has to leave, so what else can we do? You want to count cards, but they can't be Sue's cards. What else can we do?"

If the younger child can't come up with options on her own, the parent might offer a different deck of cards and say: "If you show me that you can count them carefully, I'll tell Sue and maybe she'll let you count her cards another time."

The parent may also say to Sue: "You left those cards on the floor in your sister's reach. They don't belong there. Please put them away now."

In this case once again, each child gets her needs met and at the same time is reminded she must be responsible for her actions. The parent is trying to teach children to listen to each other and to recognize that they have the resources to get their needs met in a socially acceptable way.

That's a far cry from the fuming (and feuding) that goes on when parents impose Band-Aid solutions like "Tell your sister you're sorry," or "Kiss and make up." These throw a blanket on real feelings, forcing them underground only to surface another day. Solutions are authentic and satisfying only when they come from the perspective of the children themselves.

Children get models for solving problems in constructive ways by watching how the adults around them solve their own conflicts. Unfortunately, television, the most pervasive source of information and entertainment in American households, is a poor source of behavior models. Most television programs teach children that aggression is an appropriate response to angry feelings. You can counter balance this by reading children's books that tell stories of cooperation and generosity.

Good books can also help young children learn how to solve everyday problems. Parents may want to read one of the following books to their preschool children:

*On Mother's Lap* by Ann H. Scott,  
*The Quarreling Book* by Charlotte Zolotow  
*Regards to the Man in the Moon* by Ezra Jack Keats.

Source: Judith Ross Bernstein, Department of Human Development, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.