

PLC/Book Study Guide for *Finding Your Way Through Conflict*

**Chris Amirault, Ph.D., and
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This guide is designed as a professional development resource and can be used to facilitate a book study or as a learning experience for a professional learning community (PLC). Facilitator notes are provided for additional support and explanation in planning and facilitating your school or group's sessions. We recommend that the principal and/or facilitator read the entire guide and the book before beginning the study.

For each session, participants will be asked to read chapters of the book. They may also be asked to bring particular materials or create or implement something prior to attending a session. Each chapter description includes guiding questions and suggested tasks that can be used as group activities and individual reflection during the session.

Please note that the preparation work is noted at the beginning for each session. Before you dismiss participants from each session, look ahead to the next chapter and review and clarify what must be done before the next meeting. Reach agreements if suggested tasks are going to be adjusted or modified.



Introduction: Approaching Conflict

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the introduction book study session:

- Read the introduction.
- Focus on pages 3–5 for activity 2.

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or another way to take notes and jot reflections (activities 1, 3, and 4)
- Chart paper (activity 3)
- Sticky notes (activity 3)

Activities

1. [Individual] Initial Reflections: In this chapter, the authors briefly describe their relationship to conflict and why they chose to focus on the topic of professionalism in early childhood education. Consider now your relationship to conflict:
 - a. How does conflict show up in your professional work? How professional are you when in conflict?
 - b. What is your motivation to engage in the content of this book?
 - c. What are you hoping to get out of your engagement with this book?

Facilitator note: *Encourage participants to keep their reflections to reconsider following their completion of the book.*

2. [Individual] The Six Core Principles: Consider the Six Core Principles of Working Through Conflict found on pages 3–5 and answer the following reflection questions:
 - a. Which core principle fits best with your current thinking about conflict?
 - b. Which core principle challenges the way you feel about conflict?

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3. [Whole Group] Reactions Part 1 (Part 2 follows in chapter 8): On two to five sticky notes, write a single word that comes to mind when you think about conflict. Why did you choose those words? After sharing words, write a one-sentence definition of “conflict” for your personal reference.

Facilitator note: *On chart paper, create two columns. At the top of the first column, add the heading “Before” and place all the notes from this Part 1 activity. Save this for Reactions Part 2.*

4. [Individual] Plan for Success: Make a plan for working through the content of this book.
- Set a timeline for reading each chapter, giving yourself time to read, reflect, and engage in the PLC activities.
 - Identify a person with whom you will check in to reflect on the content and hold yourself accountable. This person could be someone else in the PLC group or someone else in your life that you trust to hold you accountable.

Chapter 1: Defining Conflict

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 1 book study session:

- Read chapter 1.
- Focus on pages 8–9 for activity 2.
- Focus on pages 16–19 for activity 3.

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or another way to take notes and jot reflections (activities 1, 2, and 3)

Activities

1. [Individual] **Your Definition of Conflict:** Refer back to your definition from activity 3 in the introduction session and consider these questions:
 - a. How has your definition of conflict changed? Is there anything you would add or remove?
 - b. How might your definition of conflict compare to someone else's definition? Take this opportunity to discuss with the accountability person you chose after the introduction.
2. [Partner or Small Group] **Perspective Scenario:** In chapter 1, the authors present five scenarios and prompt consideration of varying perspectives. Write your own hypothetical conflict that might prompt varying perspectives, using experiences from your professional life if possible. Exchange with your partner and consider the questions from page 8:
 - a. Is this a conflict?
 - b. If so, what exactly is the conflict?
 - c. How comfortable would you be engaging in this conflict?

What new or different nuances of conflict came up in your discussion about your and your partner's scenarios?

Facilitator note: Encourage participants to use a hypothetical example or change names to protect the people involved in the conflict being described.

3. [Individual] **All of Them in Conflict:** On pages 16–19, you engaged in an activity to help you consider your comfort with big, typically difficult emotions: sadness, anger, disappointment, frustration, shame, and fear. Now apply the same process to help you understand someone with whom you periodically find yourself in conflict. As this exercise in empathy asks you to make space for big emotions, do your best to avoid assumptions and judgment.

On a piece of paper, write the six emotions above. Like you did for yourself in chapter 1, consider your counterpart’s comfort and safety experiencing those emotions and put a checkmark by each one you’ve observed them working through comfortably.

Now, look at the words that remain and reflect on the following:

- a. What emotions do you and your counterpart share as being comfortable with?
- b. What emotions do you have in common that you’re still developing a comfort level with?
- c. How might your differences and similarities impact children’s co-regulation in your classroom/educational setting?

Facilitator note: *Remind participants to complete this activity anonymously, focusing on empathy and suspending judgment. The intent is to see not just our own areas for growth but those of others as well.*

Chapter 2: From Reaction to Response

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 2 book study session:

- Read chapter 2.
- Focus on pages 32–33 for activity 1.
- Refer to page 32, section “Admit Intent, but Focus on Impact,” for activity 2.

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or another way to take notes and jot reflections (activities 1, 2, and 3)

Activities

1. [Individual] Choose a Tip: Read the tips on pages 32 and 33. Reflect on your biggest obstacle in shifting from reaction to response. What is it? Which tip would help you address that obstacle? Why?
2. [Partner] Intent vs. Impact: This is a tricky element to recognize and understand when in conflict. Try writing a few concrete examples by creating two columns: intent and impact. Here are a few from everyday life to get you started:

Intent: I was just trying to . . .	Impact: I didn't intend to . . .
reach across the table to get the salt and pepper.	knock over a glass of milk, creating a big mess.
make an extra payment on the mortgage.	overdraw the bank account.
get to an appointment on time.	cut someone else off at a highway exit.

Look at your list and discuss with a partner how, even when your intentions are easy to declare, the impact of your actions can often be invisible or ignored. Also discuss the defensive statements you might make if someone pointed out the impact: “But I was just . . . !”

Chapter 3: Conflict Is Sticky

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 3 book study session:

- Read chapter 3.
- Focus on pages 38–39 for activity 1.
- Focus on page 45 for activity 3.
- Focus on pages 54–55 for activity 4.

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or another way to take notes and jot reflections (activities 1, 2, 3, and 4)

Activities

1. [Individual or Small Group] Sticky Kid: Read Christine’s story about the sticky kid on pages 38–39. Think about your career working with children and respond to the following questions, discussing in a small group or writing individually:
 - a. Who is a sticky kid for you? Be sure to invent a different name for the child to protect their confidentiality.
 - b. Why does this child or situation stand out to you?
 - c. How have you used that experience to drive other actions or decisions in your career—for better or for worse?
 - d. What can you learn about yourself as a professional from reflecting on your personal sticky kid?

Facilitator note: *If working in groups, remind participants to keep stories about “sticky kids” anonymous, changing not only names but any identifying characteristics or details.*

2. [Individual] Mindfulness Practices: Mindfulness practices are simple activities or routines that can strengthen the ability to regulate emotions, focus attention, and observe without judgement. We have found that our mindfulness practices not only help us manage our feelings and responses; they build our capacity to slow down, pay attention, and make space for the feelings of others in a conflict situation. Additionally, mindfulness practices reduce stress, depression, and anxiety, improving general mental and emotional well-being and allowing us to face barriers and challenges with greater clarity and energy.

Choose one of the following introductory mindfulness activities to practice, none of which require more than 15 minutes each day. Make a commitment to your accountability partner to repeat the practice at least daily, and whenever it seems beneficial; if you find it doesn't quite fit, feel free to try a new one.

Take note of how you feel before and after these activities. Also note your reaction to them at the beginning of the week, each day, at the end of the day, and at the end of the week. Were they useful? Annoying? Uncomfortable? What did you learn about yourself when doing them?

- a. Pay attention to your breath. Find a space with minimal distractions and sit with a relaxed but stable upright posture. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. To help you focus on your breath, you may choose to slowly think “in . . . in . . . in . . .” as you breathe in and “out . . . out . . . out . . .” as you breathe out. You can also count your breaths, restarting at one when you lose count. Spend 5–10 minutes simply breathing and letting the oxygen flow through your body. And if you can't minimize distractions and have only a minute? Take ten full, mindful breaths wherever you are.
- b. Go for a mindful walk. With this practice, you focus on walking itself. So turn off your music, put away your cell phone, and save the power walk for another time. Pay attention to your body with each step; choose a relaxed pace and an even cadence. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Focus your thinking on your sensations, on what you can hear, feel, smell, and see around you. Walk for about 10–15 minutes.

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- c. Check in with your emotions and sensations. At any time in your day, but especially when you are feeling agitated or out of sorts, pause and name the feeling you are experiencing as best you can. Notice how it feels in your breath, in your jaw, neck, shoulders, stomach, legs, and so on. Carefully examine how your body experiences the emotion and describe that to yourself: “This is what anger feels like”; “This is what sadness feels like.” Allow yourself to feel the emotion while reminding yourself that both the emotion and the physical sensation are temporary. You can sense it, name it, and it will pass.
 - d. Check in with your brain. Similarly, when you’re feeling off, sit quietly somewhere and pay attention to what thoughts, anxieties, ideas, judgments, and so on appear and disappear in your mind. Note how they come and go, or spin around, or repeat again and again. Describe what your brain is doing: “There you go, brain, making another list”; “Of course you think I should have done a better job, brain!” If you can, try to find some humor in the situation, poking fun at your very impressive, essential, but regularly stupid brain.
 - e. Repeat a mantra. Find a place with minimal distractions where you can sit, then close your eyes and breathe. Choose a very simple word or phrase that means something to you. You may choose a single word like “peace,” “patience,” or “humility.” Or you may choose a phrase like “this too shall pass,” “we are imperfect,” or “I am enough.” Another way to use a mantra is to hold mala beads or prayer beads. Hold the string of beads in one hand, then, using your other hand, grasp each individual bead between the thumb and fingers, one at a time until you have touched each bead. Each time you grasp a new bead, speak or think your mantra.
- 3.** [Individual] Four Essential Attitudes of Mindfulness: Read through the four essential attitudes of mindfulness on page 45. Choose one that you want to focus on to develop more fully for the next week or so and share what you’ve chosen with everyone in your group. Choose a consistent time each day to pause and consider:
- a. How did the attitude you chose apply to interactions and thoughts throughout your day? Describe an example or two.
 - b. What experiences occurred where a greater emphasis on this attitude of mindfulness may have been helpful? What seems to be getting in the way?

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4. [Individual then Whole Group] Circle of Control: Review the description and examples on pages 54–55. On a piece of paper, create your own diagram to represent what you can and can't control in your work environment. In the center of the circle, identify all the things you can control or change. Outside the circle, identify all the things you cannot control or change in your work environment. Take a look at your diagram and reflect on the following:
- a. Do you tend to spend your energy on things you can or cannot control?
 - b. How can you use what you can't control to guide decision-making about things you can control?
 - c. How can you use the elements you can control to accept and accommodate the things you cannot control?
 - d. Are there things outside your individual control that, working collaboratively with others, you could possibly influence over time?

Now share your diagram and thoughts with the group. Discuss where they align and where they do not. Are there items outside your circles on which you might be able to collaborate to move into your circles? How would your collective action work?

Facilitator note: Before the group reads chapter 4, see activity 1 on the next page asking everyone to pair up before reading.

Chapter 4: Practice Makes Imperfect

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 4 book study session:

- Partner up for activity 1. Decide who will be Robin and who will be Pat.
- Read pages 59–61, but no further.

Activities

1. [Partner] Robin and Pat: Choose a partner to role-play with. One of you will be Robin and should ONLY read the “Meet Robin” section on pages 62–63. The other will be Pat and should ONLY read the “Meet Pat” section on pages 65–66.

Each person should take 4–5 minutes reading the case study and deciding how they will embody their character and convey their perspective. *Do not switch scripts or tell your partner what it says!*

When both people are ready, attempt to solve the conflict. Take just 3 minutes to solve it—the time pressure is part of the activity.

After the 3 minutes are up, step out of your roles and discuss:

- a. Were you able to solve the conflict? Be honest with yourselves; most people jump to a fake, “do this/don’t do that” solution instead of sorting through the whole mess!
- b. What worked in your interactions? What did you or your partner do well?
- c. What was a barrier? What did you or your partner do poorly or fail to do?

Now, exchange the “Meet Robin” and “Meet Pat” pages to read your partner’s perspective and discuss the following:

- d. What do you now understand about your partner’s perspective? What were your “aha!” moments?
- e. To what extent were Pat and Robin focused on intent? To what extent were they focused on impact?

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2. [Whole Group] Group Share: Share your experiences from activity 1 with the larger group, reflecting on the questions above.
 3. [Individual then Whole Group]: Read and Group Discussion: Read the rest of chapter 4. Share and discuss ideas or perspectives that may have helped Pat and Robin navigate their conflict better or differently. What might have changed had they implemented any of these ideas?

Chapter 5: Starting with Yourself

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 5 book study session:

- Read chapter 5.
- Focus on pages 75–76 for activity 1.
- Focus on pages 82 for activity 2.
- Focus on pages 89–93 for activity 3.

Materials Needed

- Chart paper and markers for each small group (activity 1)
- Paper and pen or another way to take notes and jot reflections (activities 2 and 3)

Activities

1. [Small Group] **Conflicts Are Opportunities:** In groups of three or four, make two columns on a piece of chart paper. In the left column, list some common early childhood workplace conflicts. For each one, in the right column, identify an opportunity that could emerge from that conflict. For example:

Conflict	Opportunity
Shared materials are not being put away properly.	Develop a labeling system to better organize space as well as a sign-out and material rotation schedule.
Teachers are arriving late for their scheduled shifts.	Plan collaboratively, taking into account individual situations, public transportation schedules, classroom priorities, etc., and adjust shifts to meet both classroom and personal needs.
Teachers respond to children's non-compliant behavior in different ways.	Discuss differing perspectives on child behavioral compliance, settling on consistent classroom expectations, language, and implications that can be shared with children.

Facilitator notes:

- *Remind participants to avoid complaining about specific current or past colleagues.*
 - *Encourage participants to avoid getting caught up in examples and details of conflicts but rather to focus on the opportunity for dialogue, perspective sharing, and solutions not yet thought of or implemented.*
 - *If participants get stuck on their own conflicts, have them switch chart paper with another group and brainstorm opportunities in the column of conflicts.*
- 2. [Small Group] Definitions of Conflict:** Write down your definition of conflict; use a few sentences to articulate your ideas. Then switch definitions with another person and discuss similarities or differences. Switch again and repeat the discussion. As a group, reflect on the following:
- a. Why might people have different definitions of conflict? What personal or professional experiences might contribute to those differences?
 - b. Why are some aspects of conflict definitions similar? What personal or professional experiences might contribute to those similarities?
 - c. How can you recognize when someone you work with is experiencing conflict?
- 3. [Individual] Four Personal Preparation Tasks:** Read through the tasks on pages 89–93 and reflect on the following:
- a. Which task will come most naturally to you? Why do you think that is?
 - b. Which task will take the most practice? What makes it challenging for you?
 - c. How will these tasks prepare you to engage in conflict?

Chapter 6: Building and Rebuilding Trust

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 6 book study session:

- Read chapter 6.
- Focus on pages 98–115 for activity 1.
- Focus on pages 107–112 for activity 2.

Activities

1. [Partner] Collaboration Tasks: Review the four collaboration tasks on pages 98–115 (listed briefly on page 115) and discuss with your partner the following:
 - a. Which task will come most naturally to you and your counterpart?
 - b. Which task will take the most practice for you and your counterpart?
 - c. How will these tasks prepare you to engage in conflict with your counterpart?

Facilitator note: *If partners are in a relatively solid, conflict-free relationship, this exercise should be straightforward. However, if the relationship is less solid, or if there is an active conflict, this exercise could be used to support resolution—if the exercise is facilitated carefully! You might need to step in, so keep an eye on the exercise as it unfolds.*

2. [Small Group] Shared Expectations: Review the suggestions on pages 107–112 and discuss the following questions:
 - a. Which of these documents or frameworks are currently in place in your organization? How are they being used?
 - b. If you are lacking some or all of these frameworks, identify one that your team could locate or develop and implement as a starting point.
 - c. What other ideas do you have for establishing shared expectations that could help facilitate collaboration during conflict?

Facilitator note: *Small groups should be formed by individuals from the same ECE program. If that is not possible, encourage participants to reflect on the conversations and consider how to use them in their own programs. Links to NAEYC Code of Ethics and referenced mission statements are on pages 146 and 147.*

Chapter 7:

The Big Conversation

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 7 book study session:

- Read chapter 7.
- Focus on pages 121–132 for activity 1.
- Focus on pages 124–128 for activity 2.

Activities

1. [Individual] **The Big Conversation: Review the Four Big Conversation Steps** as described on pages 121–131 (listed briefly on page 132) and reflect on the following:
 - a. Which aspect will come most naturally to you and your counterpart?
 - b. Which aspect will take the most practice for you and your counterpart?
2. [Partner] **Practice with Looping: With a partner, review the description of looping on pages 124–128. Practice these steps using the characters Pat and Robin from chapter 4 (or another hypothetical conflict scenario). Reflect by discussing with your partner the following:**
 - a. How did it feel to have a chance to describe your perspective and have it acknowledged?
 - b. How did it feel to really listen to someone else and restate to confirm?
 - c. What about this process felt really natural?
 - d. What aspects of this process might you need to practice more for it to feel more authentic?

Chapter 8: We Never Stop Learning About Conflict

Participant Preparation

To be completed before the chapter 8 book study session:

- Read chapter 8.

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or another way to take notes and jot reflections (activities 1 and 2)
- The two-column reactions chart paper created in the introduction session (activity 1)
- Sticky notes (activity 1)

Activities

1. [Whole Group] Reactions Part 2 (Part 1 was completed in the introduction session): On two to five sticky notes, write a single word that comes to mind when you think about conflict.

Facilitator note: Retrieve the chart paper created in the introduction session. On the second column, add the heading “After” and place all the notes from this Part 2 activity.

Discuss the following:

- a. How have reactions to or thoughts about conflict changed since reading this book? Why do you think that is?
- b. How have they stayed the same?
- c. How do you anticipate these reactions evolving over time as you become more comfortable engaging in and resolving conflict?

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- 2.** [Individual] Now What?: The best way for good information to be put to use is to make a concrete plan. On a sheet of paper, create four columns.
- a. In column one, identify three concrete ideas from this book that you want to put into action.
 - b. In column two, for each idea, identify a timeline for checking in on your implementation.
 - c. In column three, for each idea, describe how you will measure progress—how you know you are actually putting it into practice.
 - d. In column four, identify an accountability person whom you trust to check in with you about your progress.

Facilitator note: *Encourage participants to connect with the accountability person they identified at the beginning to discuss general reflections, areas of growth, and items to continue to work on over time.*

About the Authors

Chris Amirault, Ph.D., is the school director of Tulsa Educare MacArthur in Oklahoma, and for more than three decades has dedicated himself to high-quality education, teaching courses and facilitating workshops on early childhood education, conflict, assessment and instruction, ethics and professionalism, challenging behavior, family engagement, anti-bias education, and equity. Prior to his arrival in Tulsa, he lived in Mexico, working as a consultant focusing on organizational culture, change management, and QRIS system design in Oregon, Rhode Island, and California.



For thirteen years prior to that, he served as executive director of the Brown/Fox Point Early Childhood Education Center affiliated with Brown University in Rhode Island. During that time, he also taught early childhood education and development courses for area colleges and universities and served as a mentor and coach for providers throughout the community.

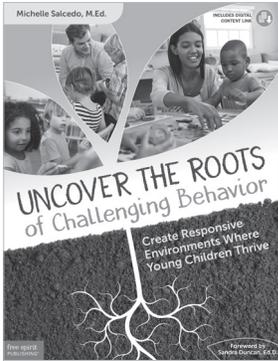
Chris also has an active volunteer life at the local, state, and national level. He served as the president of the Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children for several years, served as the chair of the Council for NAEYC Accreditation, and was a founding facilitator of NAEYC's Diversity & Equity Interest Forum. He lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Christine M. Snyder, M.A., has worked in the early childhood education field since 1999 as a teacher, center director, author, and trainer/coach. She holds a master's degree in early childhood education and a bachelor's degree in child development. She is currently director of the University of Michigan Health System Children's Center and assistant professor in the college of education at Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan.



Previously, she was an early childhood specialist at the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where she focused on developing professional learning for teachers and curriculum for preschoolers and infants/toddlers. She facilitates training throughout the United States, internationally, and online, and has published several books, articles, training DVDs, and other classroom resources for teachers. She lives in Michigan.

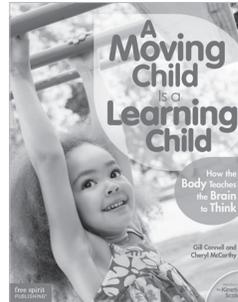
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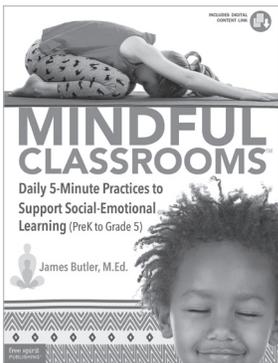
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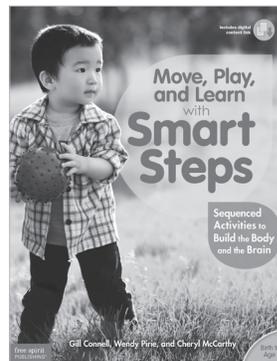
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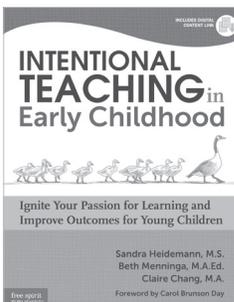
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