

FINDING YOUR WAY THROUGH CONFLICT



Strategies for Early Childhood Educators

Chris Amirault, Ph.D., and Christine M. Snyder, M.A.

Foreword by Ann McClain Terrell

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PRAISE FOR
FINDING
YOUR WAY THROUGH
CONFLICT



“Amirault and Snyder offer a unique perspective not on resolving conflicts among children, of which much has been written, but on those between the adults who work with them. Drawing on research and experience, they confront an uncomfortable topic with honesty and compassion, combined with practical solutions and encouragement. The authors convincingly argue that you must get into the ‘mess’ in order to find your way out of it. Then, step-by-step, using a wide range of scenarios, they guide readers through the tangled weeds and sticky swamps toward a clearing of the air. *Finding Your Way Through Conflict* is a timely and valuable manual in an era when conflict, often unrecognized, let alone openly acknowledged, divides us personally and politically, as well as professionally. The book offers readers the work and life skills we all need now. Once learned, and continually relearned, we can pass them on to the next generation.”

—Ann S. Epstein, Ph.D., author of *The Intentional Teacher*



“A thank you is in order for Chris and Christine as they offer this vulnerable, insightful, and thought-provoking inquiry into understanding conflict. With decades of early learning expertise and through layering personal encounters that are inherent in the work of serving others, the authors share their own conflicts as well as the toolkit they’ve developed to assist the reader in handling a range of situations. Far from a one-size-fits-all presentation of magic solutions, this book offers strategies and research that will guide the reader in developing skills for reflection, learning, and improvement. In the words of Chris and Christine, ‘If you do not learn these skills, *conflict will erase and silence the very people you seek to serve.*’ If you work to serve children and families, you’ll want to read this book.”

—Vincent J. Costanza, Ed.D., advisor, Bright Start Foundation Advisory Council

“This book is for anyone who wants to feel more confident and capable in handling those keep-you-up-at-night disagreements and simmering resentments. Amirault and Snyder explain the skills, tactics, and mindset you need to turn inevitable conflicts into opportunities for collaboration and growth. Brimming with practical advice and useful insights, this book will not only change how you approach relationships with coworkers, parents, and children, it’ll transform how you approach your life.”

—Amy Gallo, contributing editor at *Harvard Business Review*
and author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*



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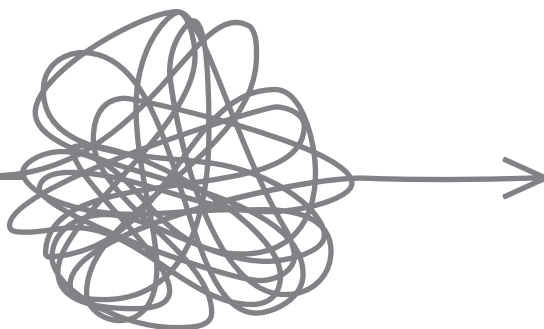
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To our families, both born and built.

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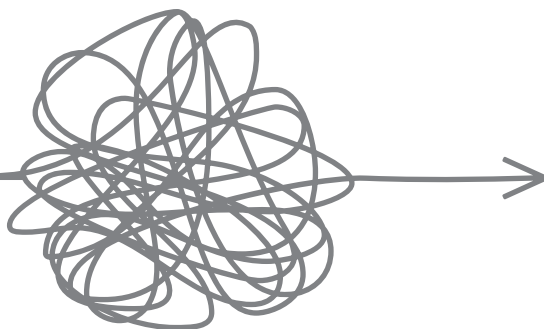


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Foreword

by Ann McClain Terrell



“Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, class, caste, or any other social markers of difference.”

Nelson Mandela

In *Finding Your Way Through Conflict*, Chris Amirault and Christine Snyder provide those of us in the early childhood education field with guidance and opportunities for reflection and growth in our ability to solve conflicts in the workplace, and, just as importantly, within our own family and community. As the authors point out, we are human and, as such, bring our “stuff” with us into our centers, programs, and classrooms. Our personal and cultural perceptions and assumptions create the lens through which we view conflicts that arise and need to be addressed. Relationships are key to early childhood education, and we must intentionally work to build and sustain meaningful and respectful relationships with each other, our colleagues and coworkers, and the children and families we serve. This deep dive into conflict resolution gives us new knowledge and skills to help us address this issue as we work with our colleagues and serve the children and families in our centers, programs, and classrooms.

Conflict resolution and problem-solving are required of a leader. In my book, *Graceful Leadership in Early Childhood Education*, I describe some real conflict situations that I have faced in my career. One such situation happened at the beginning of my job as the director of a campus-based child care program. About a month in, I had to intervene in a child–parent interaction that occurred during end-of-the-day pickup. I overheard an adult voice coming from the coatroom area. The adult was speaking to a child in a very loud, harsh tone. I approached and observed one of our student parents trying to put a coat on her child. She was also physically hitting the child, and the little girl was crying. I was sure the whole center could hear the interaction, including other parents who were picking up children.

I walked up to the parent and very intently and quietly said to her, “I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to do that here.” The parent looked at me and said in a combative manner something like, “Oh, so you’re going to tell me how to raise my child.” By now we were being observed by staff members, and I realized that this was an opportunity to model my approach to conflict resolution, as I needed to assess the situation quickly and deliver a response that

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would address it and meet the parent's and child's needs at the same time. So I responded again by intently and quietly saying to the parent, "My name is Ann Terrell and I am the new director here, and what I'm saying to you is, from one Black woman to another, that if you continue to hit your child, I will have to report you for child abuse." The parent stopped her behavior, looked at me, and said, "No one has ever told me that before." I then stooped down to the child's eye level and, while I helped her put on her coat, said to her that her mother had had a very long day and was probably tired and really needed her cooperation in getting dressed to go home. I walked them to the door, hugged them both, and said I'd see them in the morning. I ended the interaction by saying to the parent that I would be available for her if she ever needed or wanted to talk.

Sometimes conflict resolution can be frustrating when it seems that you're the only one trying to address the perceived problem. During my tenure as director of the campus child care center, we implemented a seven-step approach to problem-solving as part of the curriculum for the children. The preschool rooms served three-, four-, and five-year-old children, and quite often had turnover as the student parents graduated and withdrew their children. There was always a learning curve in our problem-solving approach for the new enrollees. "Francis" started in our program at age two and as the child of faculty, she remained with us to kindergarten entry, so she was very familiar with our approach to problem-solving. Whether it were a conflict at the sensory table or the block area, Francis understood the seven-step approach and implemented it. But one day in the beginning of a new fall semester, a conflict in the preschool classroom arose, as indicated by raised voices. The teacher used the prompt, "We seem to have a problem, can you two tell me what the problem is?" as she approached Francis and another child. The teacher then followed up with, "Francis, there seems to be a problem, how can we solve the problem?" Francis in turn stomped her foot and proclaimed, "I don't want to solve the problem!"

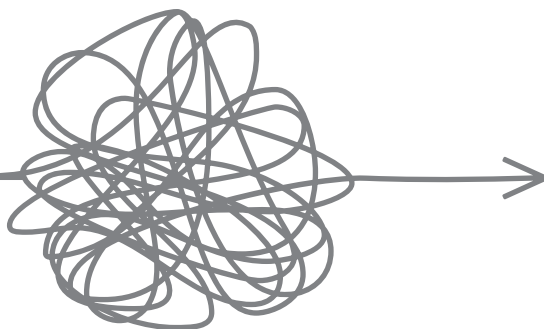
Many of us respond to conflict in this way; we want to hide from and ignore the conflict because we feel we are not adequately prepared to address the situation. Depending on the conflict, sometimes we can dive right in and resolve it. However, sometimes the conflict calls for us to sit with the issue, reflect, and then decide how best to address it. I love the title of this book, *Finding Your Way Through Conflict*. To me, it says that sometimes we must sit with the messiness and be uncomfortable in our reflection on our part in the conflict and how to resolve it.

Skilled conflict-resolution ability provides adults and children the opportunity to be competent and confident in handling these challenging situations, be they with parents, staff, peers, or between children. This book lights the path to finding your way through conflict resolution and to growth in conflict-resolution skills that will carry early childhood professionals throughout our careers.

Best,
Ann McClain Terrell

Introduction

Approaching Conflict



Dealing constructively with tough topics and awkward situations strengthens a relationship. And that’s an opportunity too good to pass up.

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations*

The teacher who interrupts you whenever you’re speaking in meetings and then accuses you of being rude when you point it out. The teammate who smiles while explaining why they chose not to do that unpleasant task, even though they wore that same smile yesterday when telling you that the same task was “No problem.” The supervisor who repeatedly reassures you that “You’re doing great!” whenever you are in their office but points out flaws every time they walk into your classroom. The veteran colleague who has been glaring at you whenever you pass them in the hallway since you arrived, for who-knows-what reasons.

Read the opening quote again.

These situations are “opportunities”? That are “too good to pass up”?! Yes!

If you take away one insight from this book, make it this: *to learn how to get out of conflict, you must learn how to be in conflict*. And that means turning toward the conflict, inhabiting its nuances fully, and engaging it as a learning opportunity for you, the other person, and the relationship you share. There are no sidelines or shortcuts, no easy ways out. Years of practice with thousands of people in our personal and work lives, along with the research we’ve gathered here, make it evident that most conflict is just like the famous bear hunt. You can’t go over it and you can’t go under it. You have to find your way through it.

Developing the ability to find your way through conflict requires learning about yourself, others, and behavior change, so you’re going to need a healthy dose of patience. You probably picked up this book to get right at those tricky, sticky conflicts—we understand! We share those persistent desires to fix conflicts *right now*. But we’ve learned that conflict is not quite that simple, and that applying conflict resolution listicles and short-term fixes often does more harm than good.

To learn how to get out of conflict, you must learn how to be in conflict.



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It can be frustrating to make that time and effort, especially since so many common conflicts seem deceptively simple at first glance. Why can't two colleagues working in the same classroom sort out who's doing what? Surely an instructional coach can find ways to address the problematic practices of a teacher they supervise? And if a parent isn't meeting basic program requirements, it doesn't have to be a confrontation, does it? Sadly, we've learned over and over that such "simple" conflicts are complex, nuanced situations that require careful thinking and reflection. After all, if they are so simple, why do they keep happening?

Following years of workshops with thousands of participants, we are certain that you can learn effective strategies that take into account the complexity and nuances of conflict. Indeed, throughout the book, we refer to how each of us has built up our tolerance for conflict, learning and using the skills we now have in our toolbelts and will share with you. Along with tales of success, we also share our stories of self-discovery as we confront new challenges from within new conflicts, a process that is ongoing for us both.

Making the decision to confront conflict from within it is the most challenging, important shift in perspective that effective conflict engagement requires, a shift we hope you'll enact throughout the book. But don't despair. We are confident that you—yes, you—can make that shift and learn how to be in and get out of conflict. Welcome to the bear hunt!

Conflict in Early Childhood Education

This book focuses on the world of conflicts faced in the work of early childhood education. And while we will at times refer to conflicts with children and with families, this book engages primarily with conflicts involving early childhood colleagues. Here's why.

When the two of us first met several years ago, we were both well into our careers in the early childhood profession. Christine had been devoting a great deal of time to thinking about how classrooms could best support young children's social and emotional development. Chris had been working with early childhood teachers and administrators on how best to nurture diversity and promote equity for the children and families they serve.

But when we sat down to talk about our work, our shared attention shifted to adult conflict in the field. Christine kept noticing that the adult teachers, more so than the young children, were the ones having difficulty working through and recovering from squabbles. Chris reflected that people's natural discomfort with negotiating differences could make already fraught topics of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and so on far more challenging.

As it turns out, our conversation is one of many conversations on conflict that have been occurring across the profession. Throughout the book, we show how adult conflict in early childhood education is at the center of much of the classroom quality research and metrics that are reshaping our understanding of children's learning environments and the relationships that support them. Concepts such as attunement, co-regulation, primary and secondary trauma, and teacher self-efficacy have become important perspectives that early childhood


educators can use to rethink how they engage with conflict in their work.

We have broadened our two-way conversation into a dynamic active-learning experience through presentations on conflict at national early childhood conferences, and we hope this book contributes to the growing discourse that we feel is vital to our profession. The hundreds of amazing early childhood educators we have met in our careers are people who can tackle the thorniest child developmental issues with confidence, rigor, and ease. But if you put many of those same people into a conflict with a peer, they hesitate to engage with the conflict, they avoid the work the conflict produces, and they become uncomfortable and awkward. Adult conflict can shatter the self-efficacy of some of the best early childhood teachers in a heartbeat.

Finally, though there are workplace conflicts in early childhood education settings that involve multiple people, most conflicts unfold and should be addressed within one-on-one relationships. To understand the dynamics within one-on-one conflict, this book focuses on two specific individuals: you and your counterpart. We are confident that learning about these two folks will aid you in every conflict, large or small!

The important work of supporting young children's learning and growth can also support your own learning and growth in conflict. Learning how to work through conflict starts with understanding some core principles.

Conflict is a natural part of life, a normal component of social interaction that activates our deepest humanity.



The Six Core Principles of Working Through Conflict

Over the years, we've found ourselves repeating these to ourselves and to others, as they often reveal important perspectives we're missing when conflicts arise. We return to these core principles throughout the book, illustrating their value in even the trickiest conflicts. See also page 81 for a one-page reproducible of the principles.

Conflict Is Natural, Normal, and Deeply Human

This principle, in a calm moment of reading, may appear completely obvious: conflict is a natural part of life, a normal component of social interaction that activates our deepest humanity. Of course, we don't feel that way when we are in conflict. Instead, we feel misunderstood. Everything is off kilter; our usual selves and skills have vanished, replaced by a clunky, demanding set of thoughts and feelings that do not reflect who we really are. But those feelings are precisely what connect us to the rest of humanity. Recognizing this commonality can help us have greater empathy for others—and ourselves—in the midst of conflict.

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Conflict Is the Work, Not a Distraction from the Work

Nearly everyone who has attended our workshops over the years describes conflict as the thing that prevents them from doing their real work. We believe conflict is the work. But, as far as we are aware, few if any higher education programs, early childhood agencies, and professional development systems teach adult conflict as a core component of that work. So, instead of seeing conflict as an impediment or distraction, we place it front and center as the work itself—and, we're convinced, usually the most important work.

Conflict Is Almost Always Reciprocal

Conflicts typically drive us into a defensive posture. That's how the blame game begins: as we experience the problems created in the conflict, we extend our index finger to point out that their source exists elsewhere. Unfortunately for our egos, it's rarely that simple. In our experience, the majority of conflicts are reciprocal, which means that everyone contributes their fair share—even though they're usually well-meaning individuals trying to do what's right in tricky situations. To help you see your part of conflict, there are sections of the book where we prompt you to fess up to your role in the mess. And it turns out this is a very effective conflict resolution strategy all by itself.

Conflict Exists If Someone Says It Does

Routinely, the conflicts that have been brought to our attention seem one-sided, at least to one of the parties. In those situations, while the aggrieved person is feeling troubled, offended, disrespected, or worse, the other person doesn't even see the problem. So following from the last principle, we assert that, if one person declares a given situation is a conflict, then there's a conflict. The collaborative relationships between adults that drive most early childhood workplaces simply cannot function properly if one person is ignoring another person's concerns. So, if someone calls foul, it's time for both parties to make a good-faith effort to work it out.

Conflict Is Sustained by Win/Lose, Right/Wrong Thinking

Skillfully negotiating conflict is never just yes or no, easy or hard. In fact, conflict feeds off of that sort of either/or thinking; it's the gasoline that makes the engine run—and often splashes out of the tank, where a spark can set the car on fire! So to learn how best to negotiate conflict, you'll need to learn how to live in the middle—in the ambiguous zone—and that is a real challenge for most of us. Our families, our cultures, our educations, even our neurology: they all drive us into this sort of either/or thinking, so we teach you in this book how to resist it by developing a thorough understanding of how to avoid either/or perspectives as often as possible.

Conflict Never Stops Teaching Us

Finally, we encourage you to approach the work of this book with humility and respect for the endlessly fascinating world of conflict. In our workshops, we always share a humorous anecdote about a conflict that the two of us have had recently—often with each other. We do that because we are convinced that no one ever stops being in or learning about conflict. We hope that you'll join us with a similar sense of humor and curiosity, recognizing that every conflict is a fascinating study of people, particularly ourselves, that includes new insights and nuances worth exploring. Not only will this attitude help you establish a bit of distance from which to perceive individual conflicts, but you can also develop new perspectives and skills within those conflicts as a result. The only way to solve any given conflict is to study it from within.

**No one ever stops being in
or learning about conflict.**



How This Book Is Organized


The chapters ahead are organized around the following set of components. Each chapter focuses on key concepts that are central to understanding conflict. We take time to explain those concepts in detail, and we delve into the research insights that enrich our understanding of them. We explore why they matter, demonstrating how the key concepts arise in the real world of conflict. In those sections we also provide appropriate, real-world examples, situations that we dissect using the concepts we've just presented.

Finally, each chapter describes precisely what to do and how to do it. We want you to develop agency and confidence in conflict, and that requires two things: a set of tools, concrete actions, reflective exercises, and practical steps to take within conflict, and a set of critical stances, attitudes and perspectives that are necessary to cultivate in order to use the tools effectively.

How to Use This Book

Before we dive in: if you've picked up this book because you are deep within a complex, urgent conflict, we want to add a note of support and guidance. We also want to encourage you to approach all conflicts with patience and self-awareness. This approach is especially critical when situations feel urgent; as we discuss in chapter 3, that urgency can prevent your brain from doing what you need to do to find your way through the conflict.

We are fully aware that you may want to skip ahead to check out later chapters that lay out steps for conflict engagement right now. So we've built the book to include the patience



All conflict engagement with others must start with an inventory of what you will be bringing into that conflict yourself.

emotions you do and don't bring into your conflicts. Exploring those emotions can be tricky, so we strongly recommend that you do the reflective exercises when you are on relatively solid personal and professional ground, and that you have a close friend, partner, or colleague available to support you.

The support can be strengthened with someone who is also reading this book, as together you will gain skills for finding your way through conflict. And if you're able to work with colleagues, the exercises in chapter 2 are excellent for developing conflict skills in teams. We've found that this sort of shared self-reflection is invaluable for everyone working in an early childhood setting. Whether you're reading alone or in a group, be sure to download the professional learning community (PLC) guide we wrote to accompany the book. It's a useful resource on ways to share in the learning and has additional information we think you'll enjoy. It can be downloaded at freespirit.com/PLC.

Additionally, this book focuses on both a reflective process and an in-the-moment-of-conflict process in which we reference some useful foundational content that is typically initiated in the development of a program and discussed in new-hire orientation. This foundational content includes program mission statements, job descriptions, and field standards like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct, to name a few. We've provided guidance for use of these tools in relation to conflict situations in chapter 6, but if you find yourself in the beginning stages of developing this foundational content, we encourage you to utilize the activities in the PLC as well as outside resources focused on developing a new program or new teams. NAEYC, Head Start, and local and state early childhood resource entities can be useful places to start.

This is a book that we hope you'll read and reflect on, and then come back to as new conflicts arise. Whether you are reading on your own or with your team, we are so glad to have you with us on this journey into conflict. Let's get started!

and self-awareness in those steps. Chapter 5, in particular, makes it clear that all conflict engagement with others must start with an inventory of what you will be bringing into that conflict yourself.

We are sure that you truly will benefit from the seeming delay created by sorting out the

DEFINING CONFLICT



As we welcome you on your journey into and out of conflict, let's focus on what may seem like an obvious question: what, exactly, do we mean by *conflict*? Like many abstract concepts, *conflict* is a term we use while assuming that others know what we mean. Unfortunately, most of us fail to define the term, both to ourselves and to others. In the midst of a situation that's tricky enough, we're operating without clear individual or shared definitions.

As a result, defining conflict is an important part of finding the way through it. The definition helps us understand how we're approaching the situation, what we value and prioritize, and it can do the same for the person with whom we are struggling. But it's not easy.

Quite regularly, a teacher or administrator will ask us in a hushed tone of voice, "Do you have to call this a 'conflict' workshop? I mean, 'conflict' sounds . . . so harsh!" Instead of providing some reassuring insights about working through conflict, people sometimes suggest that our use of the very word *conflict* produces it.

Every time we've attempted to refine our definition of conflict over the years, we've learned more about the complex set of cultural, organizational, and personal subtleties that each person brings to the work of conflict engagement and resolution. So with humility about the task ahead, we devote this chapter to defining conflict.

As with any conflict, the devil is in the details, and throughout the book, we encourage you to pause and write down some specifics concerning one or two conflicts in which you're currently embroiled. Doing so will help you see how you decide what is and what is not a conflict, decisions that will help you flesh out your own definition.

Defining conflict is an important part of finding the way through it. The definition helps us understand how we're approaching the situation, what we value and prioritize.



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Of course, it's impossible for us to know about your specific conflicts. So, in the next section, we introduce five scenarios that typify many of the sorts of conflicts we've heard from our colleagues over the years. As we explore these situations and perspectives on what is a conflict and why, it's likely that your definition of conflict will evolve. Keep in mind that the goal of defining conflict is not for everyone to have identical definitions. Rather, the goal is for each of us to develop a better understanding of our own definition of conflict, to recognize that other people have different definitions, and to consider the deep underlying components that contribute to our reactions to conflict.

Five Conflict Scenarios

For each of the following scenarios, jot down some notes and consider three things:

- Is this a conflict? Why or why not?
- If this is a conflict, what exactly is the issue producing the conflict?
- How comfortable are you engaging in this conflict? Are you likely to dive right in or run in the other direction?

Scenario One

You are pulling into the parking lot at work, and there is a car leaving. The driver is a parent from another classroom. They roll down their window and begin berating you for a political bumper sticker on your car. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The driver berating you? Your political bumper sticker? The driver's presumption that it's okay to berate you?

Scenario Two

You're a preschool teacher. You recently put up some new child-centered artwork in your classroom. One morning, you notice that your co-teacher has removed it without asking you. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The artwork being taken down? Your co-teacher not asking you? Your lack of trust in your co-teacher's decision-making—or their lack of trust in yours?

Scenario Three

You are a toddler teacher. One of the new children in your classroom was recently adopted and enrolled in your program immediately afterward. After seeming to have adjusted well for the first two weeks, the child bursts into an inconsolable tantrum for no apparent reason. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The child's tantrum? Your inability to understand the cause of the tantrum?

Scenario Four

You are a director of family services. An employee bursts into your office and angrily confronts you. They insist that you discriminated against them in the staff meeting the night before, which is shocking to you. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The employee's angry disruption? Their allegations of discrimination? Your discriminatory actions?

Scenario Five

You are an instructional coach. One of your first-grade teachers has a student who repeatedly ignores the teacher's classroom instructions. As you observe, the child again ignores the activity the teacher is scaffolding, and you watch the teacher perform the activity for the child. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The child's refusal to comply with the teacher? The teacher completing the task for the child? Your choice not to step in to give feedback to the teacher?

Now take a look at what you've written for all five scenarios and, if you considered the scenario to be a conflict, reflect on how comfortable you are engaging in it. Take a moment to rate each scenario in this way. Are you likely to dive right in or run in the other direction? This reflection will help you begin an exploration of what sorts of conflicts are most challenging for you. The conflicts we are worst at engaging are the ones we want to avoid the most.

Keep your notes handy as you determine your own definition of conflict.

Defining Conflict

Here are a few informal definitions of conflict we've heard in our work, some of which may resonate for you:

"When two people disagree about something important."

"An unresolved, heated argument."

"A problem between two people or groups of people who can't get along."

"A serious, long-term dispute."


"A dilemma that escalates to the point of mistreatment."

"Whatever is happening with this other person, it's not about me."

Which of these informal definitions best describes your understanding of conflict? We're going to unpack those definitions and dig below the surface of each one. We also return to the five scenarios above and share some of the responses we've gotten over the years. Finally, we continue to ask you to generate and mull over some conflicts of your own. As you do, we think you'll learn a lot about conflict—and a lot about yourself.

Conflict in Organizations

Conflicts in early childhood settings differ from those in our personal lives with friends, family, and acquaintances for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, workplace conflict comes with its own organization-specific nuances in the form of rules and expectations, whether stated clearly or not. Let's start with those basics.



Workplace conflict comes with its own organization-specific nuances in the form of rules and expectations.

If you are having conflicts at work, we urge you immediately to find the documents that your organization uses to define workplace interactions: job descriptions, employee handbooks, grievance procedures, family or client guidelines, and so on. If these don't exist in your workplace, now is a great time to start a conversation. It's essential that you understand

how your organization describes conflict and the processes used to engage and resolve it, and you should seek out all available human resources (HR) personnel and documentation if you're lucky enough to have them.

At the very least, you need to know the processes that exist for your protection as you make your way through workplace conflict. If they exist, your organization's HR materials will help you define some of the critical concepts that you'll need should your situation escalate from a workable interpersonal dilemma into a crisis that threatens your well-being or employment. In addition, conflicts involving workplace harassment or discrimination have state and federal laws that require very specific attention. Finally, supervisors and other HR professionals can be vital resources, often trained to help you navigate any significant workplace conflict.

As you peruse your organizational definitions and processes, you are likely to find that the workplace they describe on paper and the one to which you report every day are very different. That's because workplaces aren't merely a collection of explicit, intentional actions described in written texts. Like all collections of human beings, workplaces are a constantly evolving network of collaborative relationships that, together, make a culture.

That is to say: while these documents are critical to your position within an organization and can be essential in conflict situations, no employee handbook or grievance procedure captures any real-world workplace culture in all of its complexity. Yet conflicts are submerged in that cultural complexity.

Conflict in Culture

You've probably seen a version of the familiar iceberg diagram. Here's our take on it.

There are many cultures to which we belong and in which our relationships to our work and each other have shared meaning and value. All communication is always situated within those fluctuating meanings, relationships, and values; even though the words stay the same, the iceberg is always shrinking, growing, and shifting under the surface.

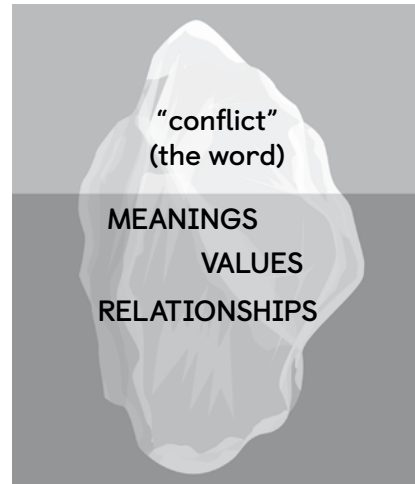
But we often forget this insight when we're in conflict and, instead, cling to our own understanding as if it's definitive. In addition, we often use words as if their meanings, relationships, and values are shared by others. We assume that other people are above the surface of the water with us.

And that's a big problem. Have you ever noticed that, when you're stuck in a conflict, words can suddenly fall apart, revealing that you and someone else don't share an understanding of a situation, person, or expectation that you thought you shared? Without trying, you can find yourself in a big mess: suddenly, someone with whom you thought you had a good working relationship sounds like a person whose values oppose your own.

We have found that the organizations that ask for our help with conflict often have not clarified those critical meanings, values, and relationships. As a result, we want to stress the importance of devoting time and effort to that process for any organization that wants to build conflict resolution skills. We're convinced that, in organizations that don't do this work, workplace culture contributes to the conflict through its very silence.

Organizations often focus their efforts on naming their positive components, such as shared values about collaboration, positive intent, and shared understanding. Unfortunately, simply naming something doesn't actually translate to the doing of it. A focus on the positive often means the organization is actively avoiding the flip side. Given that we're all imperfect human beings, it's inevitable that we'll find it challenging to collaborate with some colleagues, deciding that they are the problem and refusing to see things from their perspective. When organizations are silent about this work, our inability to live up to organizational ideals can feel like a personal failure; to an individual struggling with a conflict, that organizational silence can feel like a whispered critique.

Defining conflict requires that we break organizational silence, at both the policy and personal levels. After all, the cultures of the organizations for which we work are a stew of all of the individual culture aspects we bring to our professional lives—regional, familial, spiritual, ethnic . . . you name it. We need to feel supported in our exploration of the diverse cultural



nuances each of us bring to work. If we don't feel supported, we're likely to shut down, protecting ourselves and keeping our meanings, values, and relationships below the surface. In doing so, we amplify the tension and murkiness of conflict.

Five Big Questions

In any conflict situation, it's useful to ask yourself the following questions. Pay special attention to the italicized terms, most of which come from some of the informal definitions at the start of the chapter:

- Do you and the other person feel the situation is equally *important* and *serious*?
- Does one of you think the situation is *unresolved* while the other person feels it is *resolved*?
- Do your exchanges feel *safe* for one person but *heated* for another person who feels *mistreated*?
- Does one person think this situation just popped up while the other person feels it's a *long-term* mess that's now *escalating*?
- Is one of you complaining that you *can't get along* while the other is thinking, "It's *not about me*"?

Think about a conflict you're in right now, or speculate about what it would be like to be in one of the scenarios described earlier.

Which of the above questions feel particularly potent?

Which ones are tricky to answer?

Which ones feel irrelevant—and is it possible that the question is irrelevant for you but very relevant for the other person?

Finally, did you notice that aspects of the conflict that initially seemed straightforward became more and more complicated as you pondered these questions?

Welcome to being *in* conflict. We realize that, like most people, you probably want to get to the business of pinpointing the conflict to start resolving it. But, alas, we have learned the hard way that navigating these questions—and the icebergs that may be submerged beneath them—is the essential first step.

If you want to resolve conflicts, your personal dictionary needs your definitions not just for the term *conflict* but for several others.

- How do you define *importance*?
- When is an exchange *serious* for you, and when is it *heated*?
- What are your criteria to determine whether a situation is *resolved*?

And your dictionary isn't enough: you need access to your counterpart-in-conflict's dictionary as well.

In a perfect world, it would be wonderful if you could have a friendly chat with your counterpart, make a long list of key terms, and agree enthusiastically on a set of shared definitions. Conflicts rarely allow for such reasonable discussions at the start. So here we offer you two fundamental steps toward definition, both of which are strong foundations for successful conflict resolution.

The first is listening carefully for what someone else feels is important. Are they referring to "respect"? Does the situation feel "out of synch" to them? It requires you not to focus on what *you* think is serious and important but to listen for their use of those same words.

The second step is to ask a seemingly basic question: "What do you mean by ____?" This is trickier than it sounds. It requires empathy (not defensiveness), logical engagement (not emotional reactivity), and authenticity (not fake-nice "interest"). These are the three components of trust as outlined by Frances Frei in her terrific TED Talk on the subject. And they are the reasons why it's so powerful to ask, "What do you mean?": you're taking an empathetic, logical, authentic step into the conflict, and therefore beginning to build a way out.

When you ask, "What do you mean by ____?" with sincerity, the answers will allow you to dive into someone else's cultural ocean. You'll gain a glimpse of the meanings and values that are part of that person's understanding—meanings and values that this conflict has revealed and that are important to the person with whom you want to sort it out. What's more, you'll have a chance to articulate your own meanings and values in response, initiating a dialogue that will come as a small but meaningful relief in most situations. There's no right or wrong here, either, which allows you to take on a broader perspective regarding a situation that feels stuck.

You in Conflict

When we first started doing this work on conflict, we relentlessly emphasized the importance of seeing things from the perspective of the person with whom you are engaged in conflict. That perspective-taking remains essential. But over the years, we realized that we were rushing through another essential step, and perpetuating a key problem at the root of every conflict: knowing the "you" who is in the conflict you're in.


One of our favorite sayings about conflict comes from Poland, and it translates roughly as "Not my circus, not my monkeys." As early childhood educators we tend to step into circuses that aren't ours and try to wrangle monkeys that are not our responsibility. We are fixers of problems and righters of wrongs, and thus we often benefit from this helpful reminder to keep our boundaries distinct and strong.

There's only one problem with this sage advice: it doesn't work with conflict. Any conflict that you are in is, by definition, your conflict. That means it's your circus, and you are one of the monkeys. Sorry!

Put differently, you are one of the contributors to the conflict, even if your only contribution is your response (or lack thereof) to someone else's actions. After all, if you're in a conflict, that means that the boundaries of the conflict enclose you—that's literally what "in a conflict" means.

We emphasize this obvious point to offset the typical human response to conflict: "C'mon, this is about them; it's not about me." But, if you are in a conflict, we guarantee that you bring all of "you" into it, especially the irrational, illogical, and muddled parts.

As a result, in conflict you engage parts of yourself that you know and recognize, but you also bring other parts that you probably don't know and recognize quite as well. This can



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be challenging, for few of us like to admit our shortcomings. As you activate your intelligence and clear thinking, you also bring your irrational reactions, defensiveness, and messy feelings. You use straightforward words that float above the surface of the water, and those words inevitably point to murkier values, meanings, and relationships that are submerged.

This stew of awareness and confusion, of insight and ignorance, needs patient attention

if you want to get good at conflict. Consider the following questions to further develop your understanding of the "you" you bring to conflict:

- What experiences have tended to produce conflicts for you at work? At home? In your community?
- When you're in a conflict, what meanings, values, and relationships feel most important or most at risk?
- When you refer to those meanings, values, and relationships with words like *respect*, *understand*, and so on, what exactly do you mean by those words?
- When you have resolved a conflict with someone, what has been resolved?

Reflecting on these questions helps to emphasize the rational, logical perspectives that you bring to conflict. Consider the definitions you hold and the assumptions you make in tricky situations. These cognitive exercises are critical to building your conflict resolution tool kit, and we urge you to take that homework seriously.

But that homework is not enough. When you are in conflict, you're not just using your cognitive skill set. Conflict is an emotional, bodily experience. You feel scared or angry, miffed or

outraged. Your speech pace and volume increase or decrease; your shoulders and jaw tighten. You turn your gaze away or close your eyes; you sweat; you stammer; you hold your breath.

So we encourage you to revise your homework by reframing each question to emphasize those emotions and sensations.

- What does it feel like, emotionally and physically, when you are in conflicts at work? At home? In your community?
- What meanings, values, and relationships make you nervous, angry, or scared?
- When you have resolved a conflict, how does your body respond, and what emotions do you feel—and stop feeling?

Both of us have learned the dangers of prioritizing our thinking in conflict and ignoring our sensations and emotions. Logic is important; don't get us wrong. But logic can also be a way to avoid the other parts of ourselves that we bring into conflict. Whether we like it or not, our messy, unpleasant feelings are always, always part of our conflicts.

All of You in Conflict

In this section, we propose a brief but powerful exercise that provides insight into your emotional contributions to conflict. This exercise draws from a number of different sources, but the primary one we reference is the practice of reflective supervision, a technique that encourages supervisors of human service workers to talk openly and frankly with supervisees about their work. One important component of reflective supervision involves exploring how deep-seated feelings and desires show up in the work that we do.

In a reflective supervision discussion with an early childhood educator, a supervisor will not only talk with us about the details of a given situation with a child or family member, but they will also explore the ways in which our complex feelings, desires, and intentions help or hinder our work in that situation. The supervisor facilitates that exploration, prompting the investigation of complex meanings, emotions, and experiences and providing support and information that helps the supervisee answer their own questions. This exploration is especially important for early childhood educators who are expected to do the very same things for the children and families they serve.

In this way, reflective supervision activates *parallel process*. Reflective supervision sessions are intended to focus on the ways that certain relationships impact other relationships. In that sense, the process creates parallels, finding alignments between the supervisor/supervisee relationship and the teacher/student relationship, for example.

When we looked at teachers who were interacting with noncompliant children, for example, we saw parallels to the ways that those teachers interacted with colleagues, supervisors, and parents. Teachers who avoided angry children also avoided angry parents; teachers who ignored tearful children seemed to take distance from colleagues struggling with grief.

We now know that these parallels in our responses to conflict have significant corroboration in current research on co-regulation. Co-regulation is a complex but essential pattern of interactions that, over time, establishes self-regulation and the ability to manage thoughts, actions, and emotions. Co-regulation is a key component in secure, healthy adult-child relationships (Rosanbalm and Murray 2017). Adults with a healthy sense of their own self-efficacy co-regulate to develop the self-efficacy of children.

The reverse is also true: dysregulated adults have a negative impact on children's social, emotional, and behavioral development. This research is still developing, but we are convinced that the toxic environment adults create for children has a negative impact on the ways children interact with each other and manage their own emotions (Murray, Rosanbalm, and Christopolous 2016). And that means that your ability to manage your own responses to situations at work is a critical component of the environments you create and the relationships that support and sustain those environments.

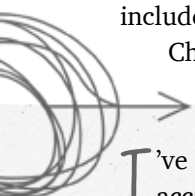
The following exercise uses the tools of reflective supervision to help you sort out some of those responses. In particular, it will help you identify the feelings that can cause you to slip into dysregulation while at work. Take a piece of paper and write the following words on the page:

Sadness Anger Disappointment Frustration Shame Fear

Now take a few moments to reflect on the last two or three difficult situations you've found yourself in at work: frustrating parents, dysregulated preschoolers, challenging colleagues. As you reflect on those situations, try to identify what you were feeling in each moment.

With that reflection in mind, put a check mark on each emotion that you experienced comfortably and safely during those situations. We're not asking for you to say you *like* the emotion; we are finding out whether you can, in the normal course of your day and life, feel a sense of acceptance when you're experiencing it. If you have additional emotions to include, write those too. Even positive emotions like excitement and joy are helpful to note.

Chris has been thinking about this a lot.



I've been in education for my entire professional life, and one of my proudest regular accomplishments is watching someone I've mentored take the next step in their career. Last week, it happened to two of my favorite lead teachers, both of whom have become master teacher/coaches at a different school in my agency. Watching them transition onto a new leadership team with grace and intelligence, I can feel a sense of sad nostalgia about working together for years to reach this moment.

But the sadness doesn't feel awkward or unsafe. Instead, the sadness feels right, like a moment of passage for someone at this stage of my career, something I can observe in myself without feeling thrown off. In fact, I kind of like the sadness, thinking about the wonders of watching people you value and admire grow into leaders.