



Conflict: Learning to Live Together

By HeyZeus Oak

Anyone who spends time with young children will eventually witness the moment. Two children reach for the same toy at the same time. One pulls while the other pushes. A tower is knocked over. A cry erupts across the room. Within seconds an adult is called over to help sort things out.

For many adults these moments feel like problems that must be solved quickly. We imagine that a peaceful childhood should be free of conflict. When disagreements arise, we may feel the urge to step in immediately, decide who was wrong, and restore order as quickly as possible. Yet conflict is not a mistake in childhood. In many ways it is one of the places where children begin to learn how to live with other human beings.

Young children are still discovering themselves. Their impulses are strong, their feelings rise quickly, and their ability to manage those feelings are only just beginning to develop. At the same time, they are slowly discovering something equally important: other people exist, and those people have their own desires, intentions, and limits. When two children want the same toy, neither one easily steps aside. Each child experiences the situation from the center of their

own world. Through encounters like this the child slowly begins to discover that the world does not revolve entirely around their own wishes.

For most of human history these kinds of encounters happened constantly. Children grew up surrounded by other children. Siblings, cousins, neighbors, and playmates formed a small society in which children spent much of their time together. Within this small society children argued, competed, cooperated, and reconciled many times each day. They experienced frustration when another child refused to share. They learned to negotiate space, repair broken games, and return to play after conflict. These moments were not arranged as lessons. They were simply part of growing up.

Modern childhood often unfolds differently. Families are smaller, and many children spend much of their early years primarily with adults. Adults naturally adapt themselves to the child's needs and rhythms. They step aside, accommodate, or smooth over difficulties in ways that other children do not. Another child, however, brings their own will into the situation. They want the toy. They want the turn. They want the game to go their way. When children meet one another, their wills inevitably collide.

It is within these small collisions that something essential begins to develop. The child gradually discovers that other people have intentions and feelings just as real as their own. This discovery cannot be taught through explanation alone. It must be experienced. For this learning to unfold, children need the steady presence of adults who can guide these moments with calm authority.

Part of that guidance involves something that many adults today feel hesitant to offer: clear and reliable boundaries. Young children do not yet have the inner capacity to manage every impulse that arises within them. Their feelings can move quickly into action. When a child pushes another child, throws a toy, or refuses to stop an activity, it is often not a calculated decision but a moment when impulse has outrun self-control.

In these moments the adult temporarily holds the boundary for the child. Sometimes this boundary must be firm and unmistakable. An adult may calmly say, "I won't let you hit," while gently stopping the child's hands. If a toy is being thrown, the adult may say, "I can't let you throw that," and remove it from the situation. These moments are not punishments. They are acts of protection.

There are times when a young child must encounter a clear and unmovable limit. A calm and confident "no" can be deeply reassuring for a child. It communicates that someone responsible is present to hold the situation and protect everyone involved. Children quickly sense whether an adult truly means what they say. If a boundary shifts each time a child pushes against it, the child will continue testing it, not because they are manipulative but because they are trying to discover

where the edge actually lies. A clear boundary allows the child to relax. It reveals the structure of the world beyond their own impulses.

Over time these outer limits slowly become inner ones. What begins as the adult saying “no” gradually becomes the child learning to say “no” to themselves. Punishment often interrupts this process. When a child is punished for a mistake, the focus shifts away from understanding and toward avoiding consequences. The child may become defensive, ashamed, or fearful rather than reflective. Rewards can create a similar problem. When children are offered prizes for good behavior, the focus shifts toward external approval rather than the natural experience of cooperation and responsibility.

Young children do not need punishments or rewards in order to learn how to live with others. What they need is something both simpler and more demanding from the adults around them. They need calm authority, consistent boundaries, and the opportunity to experience the social challenges that naturally arise when children share space together. Through these encounters something important begins to grow within the child. They discover that their actions affect other people. They begin to recognize the feelings of others. They slowly develop patience, empathy, and the ability to repair relationships after something goes wrong.

Conflict also strengthens the child’s developing will. When every frustration is removed, children can become dependent on adults to solve their problems. But when adults guide situations without eliminating every difficulty, children gradually gain confidence in their ability to navigate relationships themselves. They learn that disagreements can happen and still be resolved. They learn that frustration eventually passes. They learn that connection can be restored after something breaks down.

The early years are full of strong impulses and powerful emotions. A toy will be taken. A tower will fall. Someone will cry. Someone will shout. And before long the game begins again. These moments may appear chaotic from the outside, but within them something important is quietly taking shape.

Through these small encounters children begin to discover that the world is shared. They begin to recognize that other people matter just as much as they do. Slowly, through many small conflicts and many small reconciliations, they begin to learn the delicate art that every human being must practice throughout life: the art of living together.

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