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Saima Khalid

*Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi*

Syeda Imrana Raza

*Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi*

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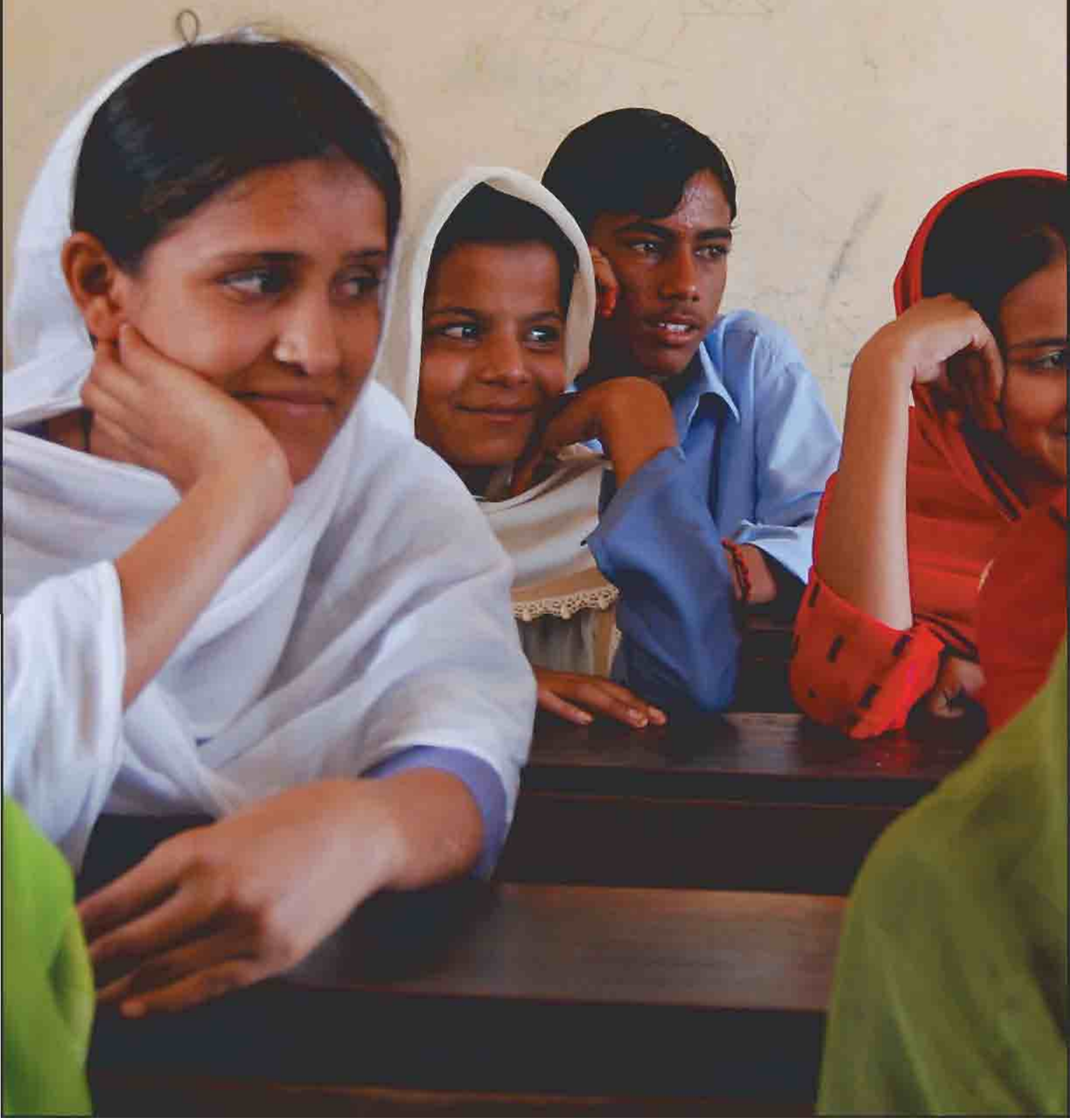
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# Managing Conflict in the Classroom

By Saima Khalid & Imrana Raza



## Handling conflicts in classrooms in a productive and healthy manner can serve the purpose of building bridges for greater cohesiveness and improved relationships.



The major focus of early year classrooms is the holistic development of young children which includes all developmental domains i.e. physical, cognitive, social, moral and emotional. A child who develops holistically well during the early years is more likely to be a happy and productive member of society than one who does not. Thus their contribution to the society and culture will be effective as well. Research indicates that during the first eight years of life, children are highly influenced by the social values, expectations, attitudes, traditions and cultural norms and values that are transmitted from their environment. Therefore, in order to develop peacemaking behaviours and the skills to resolve conflicts, the children are required to be supported and provided

ample opportunities to deal with conflict since very beginning.

The National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (2007) also emphasizes the holistic development of children and highlights that it is crucial that emotional intelligence be developed in the early years. This includes the development of "confidence, curiosity, purposefulness, self-control, connectedness, and capacity to communicate and cooperate." In the ECE classrooms, this area of development can only be enhanced if the teachers are ready to accept differences and intelligently manage conflict situation in their classrooms. Moreover, the head teachers or school administrators need to shun the notion that 'a good classroom has no conflict' because this attitude often leads to extreme disciplinary regulations which can only stall disagreements.

Katz and Lawyer (1993) state that conflict is the state which develops when there is a difference in the opinion, notions and perceptions among individuals. It's an internal state of a person and at times depends upon the assumptions of others. Depending on how they are dealt with, conflicts may end up in the form of depressing feelings and behaviours or on the contrary result in improved efficiency and strengthening the relationship among individuals. So the strategies one utilizes in order to deal or cope with any conflict situation are critical.

### What's so Good or Bad about Conflicts?

Behaviour management is a key issue for all teachers and education support staff. It has been observed quite often in the current practice, that if any conflict situation occurs in classrooms, the usual response of teachers is to intervene by either snubbing children to stop the conflict or separating the two students to sit in different groups.

Perhaps this is a convenient strategy to avoid conflicts in the class setting. However by evading conflicts in this manner teachers are unable to realize conflict situations in classrooms as potential opportunities for developing self control, cooperation and patience amongst children.

Handling conflicts seems difficult and challenging but if handled in a productive and healthy manner, conflict actually serves the purpose of building bridges for greater cohesiveness and improved relationships. Conflicting situations provide opportunities for creativity, transformed

energy, production, development and growth to individuals, groups and organizations and results in increased cohesion and trust among individuals. It can lead to effective personal and organizational performance.

Teachers ought to realize that conflicts between children can neither be resolved by sweeping them under the carpet nor by force. Subsequently, speaking about managing conflicts, teachers might want to take up measures in the classroom like maintaining a specific and unambiguous environment to keep conflicts at a minimum level; retaining limits and expectations for developmentally appropriate behaviour; providing plenty of choices for children's play; setting up and following consistent respectful ways of interacting and model them daily; and using effective plans for transition in order to have peaceful calm environment.

### Responding to Conflicts amongst Young Children

Conflicts between children can be controlled or managed productively through teaching conflict management skills. These include compassion, caring for others, accepting and accommodating others' opinion, compromising according to the situation, valuing own and others self, sharpening sense of identity and solidarity,

communicating and interacting, clarifying the real problem by having open dialogue and peaceful discussion for resolving the issue of the problem.

If the conflicts are not resolved then it results in the development of negative emotions which can eventually

lead to decreased productivity and / or cooperation. Teachers can face similar situations in the classroom if conflicts among children are not settled or resolved for long durations. A child or group of children may not like to work with other classmate(s) they are in conflict with. Since children are highly egocentric especially as they try to develop their sense of self in the early years, the situation can become worse to the extent where teachers are unable to manage a participatory and cooperative learning environment.



4. **Restate the problem:** Repeat the information again that you have observed to clarify the problem and check your statement with the children based on what the children have told.

5. **Ask for Ideas and choose one together:** Encourage children to talk to each other. Describe the choices or give suggestions that can work out for the simple misunderstandings. Ask simple 'yes and no' questions and inquire feasible ideas and probable agreements from them.

6. **Be prepared to give follow up support:** Try to stay near the children and provide your support to encourage the solution and tell them, "You solved the problem!"

There are many ways and strategies for resolving conflicts. Some researchers have identified six major steps to resolve any conflict among children:

1. **Approach the situation calmly:** Observe what is happening. Place yourself at the child's level and use a calm voice; gentle touch with welcoming gesture. Stop any upsetting actions.
2. **Acknowledge children's feelings:** Identify and describe the children's feelings you observe and avoid asking questions until children are calm. Share the details of what you have seen.
3. **Gather Information:** With infants and toddlers or children with language delays; observe children's actions and describe the problem, with older toddlers and preschoolers, ask open-ended questions try to ask questions from one child at a time.

Teaching students how to resolve conflicts will be more effective if the teachers also facilitate development of following traits / skills in children:

- **Co-operation:** Helping children learn to work together and trust, help, and share with each other.
- **Communication:** Helping children learn to observe carefully, communicate well, and listen to each other.
- **Respect:** Helping children learn to respect and enjoy people's differences and to understand prejudice and why it is wrong.
- **Expressing themselves positively:** Helping children learn to express feelings, particularly anger, in ways that are not destructive, and learn self-control.
- **Conflict resolution:** Helping children learn how to resolve a conflict by talking it through.

## Myths of Conflict

By Randy Fujishin

### Myth 1: Avoid conflict at all costs

One of the most common ways to deal with conflict is to avoid it. Sometimes, conflict or possible conflicts, can and should be avoided. But in your small group, don't avoid conflicts at all costs. Conflict can often benefit the task and social dimensions of the group. In fact, conflict can be an opportunity to listen to differences, discover new common ground, and uncover more effective ways to interact together as a group.

### Myth 2: Conflict is always someone else's fault

Frequently, our first response when conflict occurs is to find someone to blame. Many times we fail to explore the various factors of a disagreement or dispute. Whenever such differences surface, instead of finding someone to blame, you may want to first explore and examine the various factors of a disagreement or dispute.

### Myth 3: All conflicts can be resolved

There is general belief that if we try hard enough, talk long enough and compromise, we will eventually resolve whatever conflict is before us. However not all conflict can be resolved. Despite all effort some conflicts may never be resolved. And that is okay. That's life.

**Source:** Discovering the Leader Within

## Five Styles of Handling Children's Conflicts

Styles of Handling Conflict	Uses	Limitations
<p><b>DIRECTION</b> When you say, in effect, "Do this," you are directing. Direction is a non-negotiating approach. An adult authority decides what needs to be done and gives the direction that it be done. It's important to recognize that directing need not be unkind or authoritarian. Children can be told nicely, but clearly, what they need to do.</p>	<p>When safety is at stake; when children are out of control and need help getting back into control; when there is no time to discuss or negotiate; when the problem is not important enough to spend much time or energy.</p>	<p>Doesn't build children's independence in problem solving; may cause resentment on the part of children; may not really solve problems.</p>
<p><b>MEDIATION</b> A third party--either a staff person or any trained person--sits with children and helps them work out their conflict by creating an environment where problem solving can take place. This is done by strictly enforcing ground rules: be honest, no interrupting, and no name calling or put downs. The mediator helps the disputants define their problem, develop solutions, and choose a workable solution.</p>	<p>Because the disputants are solving the problem themselves, they are invested in the solution. Also, it helps get to the root of some persistent problems.</p>	<p>Takes time! The conflict may not be worth the time and effort compared to the learning that comes from it.</p>
<p><b>ARBITRATION</b> Also involves a third party who hears both (or all) sides, then tells the disputants how they should handle the conflict. This may be done with some input from the disputants, or by simply saying, "This is what you're going to do."</p>	<p>Efficient. Gives the disputants a chance to state their point of view, but doesn't spend a lot of time on problem solving.</p>	<p>May not get to the root of the problem. The disputants may not learn anything about solving conflicts.</p>
<p><b>JUDGMENT</b> Sometimes the emphasis needs to be not on problem solving, but on determining who was right and who was wrong. Children depend on the adult to act as a judge, to listen and weigh the evidence, and then to pass a fair judgment.</p>	<p>When there has been clear wrongdoing and the parties involved want justice; when there is a need for consequences to be decided upon for actions.</p>	<p>Doesn't build independent problem-solving skills; keeps children dependent upon adults; is by nature a win-lose solution rather than a win-win solution.</p>

### Conclusion

Constructive conflict management strategies are important in maintaining a positive classroom environment since unresolved conflict does not always go away and can grow into a bigger issue. Teachers have a critical role in both containing and / or resolving conflicts through dealing with the situation systematically and not taking sides.

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**About the Writers:**

*Ms Saima Khalid is currently an instructor at AKU-IED and carries considerable experience in both academic training and programme administration. She has been involved since 2007 in conducting Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) at AKU-IED in Karachi as well as at its Professional Development Centers in Northern Areas, Chitral and Azad Jammu Kashmir.*

*Syeda Imrana Raza has been associated with the field of education for more than ten years. During the past three years, she was facilitating ECED field based Teachers' Training Programmes at different levels and other ECED initiatives at AKU-IED. She has worked as a primary school teacher; as an Academic Consultant and as a Teacher Educator at different school systems in Karachi, Pakistan.*