AMS
American Montessori Society

Family Connection

NOVEMBER 2026



Supporting Your Child's Conflict-Resolution Skills

BY AMY GERSTACKER

Have you ever listened to your child describe a conflict at school and wondered how to respond?

Our instinct as caregivers is to honor our child's feelings and help them navigate difficult situations. But before making judgments and jumping into problem-solving mode, it helps to remember a few things about early childhood friendships and the valuable role you play in shaping young children's conflict-resolution skills.

First, keep in mind that young children, particularly 3- and 4-year-olds, often share events through the lens of their emotions and current experiences. As a result, they may not always share a complete picture of what happened. This doesn't mean they are being dishonest; young children are still developing the skills to recall events, communicate their experiences, and consider different perspectives. It is not uncommon for a young child to only share the last thing that happened before dismissal.

Friendships in early childhood are still developing, and children may move between disagreements and reconnection as they learn to navigate relationships. If a friend didn't want to play with your child today, their genuine takeaway may be that they are no longer friends, only to

consider that child their best friend again the next time they play together. These ups and downs can be a normal part of social development.

Of course, not all conflicts are part of the everyday ups and downs of childhood friendships. Parents can trust their instincts while remaining curious and gathering information to determine when a situation needs to be addressed in partnership with the adults at school. If you are concerned that your child is experiencing bullying or ongoing distress, work with your child's teacher to advocate for your child and ensure they feel safe, supported, and heard at school.

When navigating everyday disagreements, it is also important to consider how your questions and check-ins can influence your child's ability to solve conflicts. Daily questions like, "Did _____ do _____ again?" may inadvertently focus your child's attention on negative interactions. While it is important to take their concerns seriously, we also want to help children recognize their own capacity to navigate challenges, communicate their needs, and participate in finding solutions.

So how can you respond in a way that helps your child feel heard and positively impacts their social development?

START BY TAKING A MOMENT FOR YOURSELF

In the classroom, we remind children that when they experience big emotions, those feelings can take over their thinking, so their first step is to calm themselves. The same is true for adults. Before responding, take a moment to notice your own reaction and approach the conversation with calm and curiosity. Once everyone is calm, listen to your child and validate their feelings. You might say, "That sounds really frustrating."

HELP YOUR CHILD FIND THEIR WORDS

Rather than immediately offering a solution, ask questions that encourage your child to reflect on what happened and what they might do next. You might ask, "What did you say when that happened?" or "What could you try next time?" If your child is unsure, help them practice simple phrases such as, "I don't like that," "Can I have a turn when you're finished?" or "I want to play, too." These conversations give children opportunities to develop the language and confidence to advocate for themselves.

REMEMBER THAT EVERYONE IS LEARNING

Sometimes, children make mistakes not because they are unkind, but because they are still developing the skills to communicate, cooperate, and navigate relationships. Montessori classrooms intentionally support this learning through grace and courtesy lessons, which give children opportunities to practice social interactions in a calm, respectful setting. Children may practice how to invite someone to play, express disagreement, listen to another person's perspective, or make amends after a conflict. Many Montessori classrooms also use peace tables or other designated spaces where children can talk through disagreements and work toward solutions together.

You can reinforce this learning at home by encouraging your child to consider possible solutions rather than providing all the answers. Questions like, "What do you think would help?" or "How could you work that out together?" communicate that you trust your child to develop these skills with practice and support.

PARTNER WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER

Remind your child that their teachers are there to help. Encourage them to ask a teacher if they need support talking with a friend. This is also an opportunity for you to check in with your child's teacher, particularly if a conflict is ongoing or your child is feeling distressed.

Observation is one of the most important tools for a Montessori teacher. Teachers intentionally dedicate time to observing children in the classroom and on the playground, so they often have valuable insights into your child's social interactions. They may be able to give more context, monitor the dynamic, and create a plan with you to support your child's blossoming conflict-resolution skills. Teachers can also intervene when necessary to ensure children feel safe and supported. Parents can take a similar approach by slowing down, practicing curiosity, and seeking to understand before drawing a conclusion.

When we have a better understanding of what is typical for young children and help them see that they are capable, we support them in navigating conflicts. The child who has done something upsetting receives feedback from peers and adults to learn what is acceptable and what is not. Likewise, your child has opportunities to practice expressing their feelings, listening to others, and advocating for themselves. These skills do not develop overnight; they develop through practice.

Together, we can help our children develop these skills in a safe space, and the process becomes a valuable learning opportunity for all.

Tools for Supporting Older Children and Teens with Conflict Resolution

As children grow, the role of adults shifts toward listening, asking thoughtful questions, and supporting their growing independence as they navigate increasingly complex relationships.

- **Listen before offering solutions**. Practice active listening by reflecting back what you hear. Saying, "It sounds like you felt left out," shows your child that you are listening and taking their feelings seriously.
- **Lead with curiosity.** Ask open-ended questions like, "And then what happened?" or "Can you tell me more?" Give your child space to share their experience without immediately interpreting or judging the situation.
- **Encourage independent problem-solving.** Before jumping in, ask, "What have you tried in a similar situation before?" or "How do you think you could handle this?" These questions communicate confidence in your child's growing competence.
- **Make room for emotions**. Resist the urge to bring every conversation to a clear solution. Sometimes, children and teens simply need a safe space to express frustration, disappointment, or sadness.
- **Support perspective-taking.** When your child is ready, gently invite them to consider another point of view. Questions like, "What do you think your friend was feeling?" can help develop empathy and understanding without dismissing your child's experience.
- **Respect their growing independence**. Ask, "Would you like my advice, or would you rather I just listen?" Giving older children a voice in how they receive support reinforces their autonomy while reminding them that you are available when they need you.

The Gift of Toddler Time: Making Room for Independence

BY STEPHANIE CAVINDER

Imagine watching a toddler carefully carry a cup of water to the table, taking slow, deliberate steps and concentrating on every movement. It might take several minutes, but for the child, this simple task is an important opportunity to practice independence. In Montessori education, there is a playful phrase for these moments: "Toddler Time." It refers to the extra time a young child needs to complete a task independently. While the phrase may bring a smile to anyone who has spent time with toddlers, it also offers an important reminder: slowing down to meet the pace of the infant or toddler is a meaningful way to support their early development.

As parents and caregivers, we provide the child with care, attention and a home environment to foster their growth and development. Yet in the rush of everyday routines, we may overlook small opportunities for children to practice emerging skills. What might we notice if we gave them just a little more time?

During her lifetime, Maria Montessori closely examined the first three years of development and found that the youngest child is constantly engaging in remarkable periods of development, often referred to as sensitive periods. These are times when children show particular interest in developing certain abilities, such as movement, language, and order. During these periods

of development, the child engages in the enormous tasks of constructing the self and working toward independence. A thoughtfully arranged home environment can make it easier for children to explore and practice those abilities.

Within the home environment, there are a multitude of opportunities to spark curiosity in the child. Parents and caregivers can support these opportunities by noticing what their child is trying to do and making space for independent attempts when practical. Throughout their early development, the child will experience many small moments that hold the potential to propel their development and independence.

> Growing is a succession of acquisitions of independence. At first, they are physical acquisitions—teeth, walking, language—each comes at the right time if the child is allowed to live naturally, for nature has assigned a definite order for these acquisitions. (Montessori, 2012)



"Toddler Time" can be part of familiar routines: allowing a child to carry a napkin to the table, helping them begin to wash their hands independently, or waiting while they attempt to put on their shoes. The adult remains nearby to offer support when needed. Giving time does not mean withholding help; it means observing when to assist and when to let the child continue.

As the infant and/or toddler moves through this early development, they experience a series of developmental stages that, while they may seem like tiny moments, comprise the foundation of the child's educational journey and their understanding of the world around them. These moments add up to an explosion of understanding which, if fostered with intention, can lead to independence in the child's construction of the self.

The goal is to recognize that learning is already happening in ordinary family life. This week, choose one familiar moment when you can slow down and follow your child's pace. A few extra minutes, offered with patience and attention, can make room for growing independence. That is the gift of "Toddler Time!"

References

Montessori, M. (2012). The psychology of the newborn. In The 1946 London lectures (p. 108). Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company.

Educating the Human Potential: A Podcast by AMS

Real Conversations to Inspire Lifelong Learning

Educating the Human Potential covers education topics with a Montessori lens. Download and subscribe wherever you find podcasts.

