



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Resolving conflicts takes good communication

By Jane Sutter

The popular song "Let There Be Peace on Earth" includes the lyric "Let me walk with my brother, in perfect harmony." Yet every parent and teacher knows that while the song paints a beautiful vision, kids don't always walk in harmony with their friends, classmates and siblings.

But youngsters and teens can learn the necessary skills to reduce the conflicts that inevitably come up in life. That takes the ability to recognize feelings (a child's own and those of others) and communicating face to face (rather than texting), say two educators in Catholic schools in the Rochester diocese.

"No matter what the age, conflict resolution has a lot to do with communication, not only what you're saying but how you're saying it," said Dr. Daria Alongi, the Wellness and Community Health Coordinator at Our Lady of Mercy School for Young Women in Brighton. Alongi is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice and was formerly affiliated with a pediatric medical practice.

With really young children, parents should model appropriate behavior and identify emotions as a way to teach kids, Alongi said. "Younger kids don't have the emotional intelligence or verbal skills to be able to communicate in a way that older kids are able to." Alongi, the mother of two toddlers and the stepmother of two kids ages 11 and 14, says



she tells the toddlers the emotions she feels. For example, if she stubs her toe and cries out, she can tell the toddlers that her toe hurts and she's really frustrated. Or she might say, "Mommy's sad" or "Daddy's upset," so the kids learn to identify their emotions.

Reading books to kids about feelings can also be helpful to teach them about emotions, Alongi said. Kids in grade school can get support from adults to work out problems with their peers. Teachers and parents can help kids to learn to sit down, listen to another child, be respectful, talk about what happened and understand if the other child was hurt emotionally. An example of something an adult might say to a child is, "When you called Johnny that name, it really hurt his feelings," Alongi said.

She also advises that adults show, not tell, the child what to do to rectify the situation, by asking "What can you do to make it better?" rather than telling him or her: "Go do this to make it better." Then the child can use critical thinking skills to figure out appropriate action.

Expressing feelings

When Colleen Meehan taught third grade at St. Mary Our Mother School in Horseheads, she used a popular movie to help students learn to identify and express their feelings. She showed the students clips from the Pixar animated movie *Inside Out*, where a young girl deals with a variety of emotions as she adjusts to moving to San Francisco with her family from the Midwest. The emotions are shown as animated people living in the girl's head and giving her advice on life. From watching the movie clips, Meehan's students learned about different emotions and then wrote about their feelings in their journals.

Meehan now teaches sixth grade at St. Mary Our Mother School, and she still focuses on helping kids identify and express their feelings, particularly through daily morning meetings

Highlights, compliments and apologies

Colleen Meehan, sixth-grade teacher at St. Mary Our Mother School in Horseheads, has her students share on Fridays their highlights, compliments and apologies as a way to build relationships among her students. She noted that families can adopt this practice and use it at dinnertime. She fondly recalls "pizza nights" in her family when she was growing up. Every Saturday night, the family made home-made pizzas and spent time together. This exercise would work well for such family nights, she noted.

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with her class. "We're really open about what our feelings are and how we are feeling them." Friday morning meetings have a special agenda where students share highlights, compliments and apologies. "Students highlight something that went really well this week in school or their personal life, or something they are looking forward to over the weekend, and they are able to compliment any other student in the classroom and apologize to anyone they believe they owe an apology to." Meehan said that this practice has produced a lot of productive conversations. "Even students who don't like to share a lot will start sharing because it feels like a safe place to share those feelings."

It's important at that age that students try to resolve conflicts on their own, Meehan said, and she acts as a facilitator if necessary. For example, if a student tells Meehan she has an issue with another student, the first thing Meehan does is ask if she has talked to the other student. If the answer is no, then Meehan asks the student to try to have that conversation first and let the other child know this is how she feels. Many times that works, and the student doesn't come back to Meehan for more help.

If the situation isn't resolved, then Meehan will bring the two students together during recess or at the end of the day. Each student gets to tell their side of the story uninterrupted before they respond to each other. Meehan deliberately focuses on relationships and cultivating them so problems don't get to a conflict stage. Thanks to the conversations in the class, students can feel comfortable and safe resolving issues, Meehan said.

This school year, Meehan has an unusually small class of nine students, where 15 or 16 is more typical. Some students have been together since they were quite young and they may argue over little things like brothers and sisters sometimes do. Meehan also has to remind students that it's ok if another student doesn't want to sit with them at lunch one day or play with them at recess. She tells them: "If

Pause, rewind, play

Dr. Daria Alongi, licensed clinical psychologist, said there are a variety of different models to help kids learn to identify and regulate their emotions. One that she likes is a program called Emotional ABCs <https://www.emotionalabcs.com/>.

Kids learn to "pause" and breathe to get oxygen to their brain and then talk about the emotions they are feeling; "rewind" and tell an adult the sequence of events that just happened; and "play" to talk about the choices they have and pick a good one.

An article that walks through these steps in detail is here: <https://www.emotionalabcs.com/news/?p=teaching-self-regulation-skills-to-children>

The website for Emotional ABCs has free content but also offers subscriptions for parents and teachers for full access.

someone didn't want to play with you today, it doesn't mean they don't want to be your friend, they just need a break."

Alongi emphasized that the language an adult uses is important in the process of conflict resolution. She prefers to talk about "good choices" and "poor choices," rather than use the word "bad." For example, a parent can ask a child: "Maybe you made a poor choice when you pushed Johnny on the slide. What could you have done instead?"

Text messaging complicates matters

With so much communication now taking place digitally and virtually, adolescents and teens may have trouble talking face to face, whether with their peers or teachers, Alongi said.

At Our Lady of Mercy school, there is a rule that cell phones are "off and away" during the school day, said Alongi, who sees the rule as important so students, if they need to communicate with a friend or a teacher, must go find that person and talk to them. The rule really encourages face-to-face contact, Alongi said.

But for some students, the thought of in-person communication may create anxious feelings.

For example, Alongi had a student who had fallen behind in her work in a class, and the student was worried about how to approach the teacher. So Alongi modeled the behavior by walking up to the teacher and pretending to be a student and saying, "Hi. I'm in your class and I'm missing some work, and I want to know how to catch up."

Alongi emphasized that this modeling showed the student how to handle the situation so she could have the conversation on her own with the teacher.

When adolescents engage in text messaging with their peers, the experience is rife for misunderstandings both in what is written in the text and in the emojis, Alongi said. "So much emotion is attached to what comes through the phone, that it distracts."

Meehan sees an additional problem with cell phones and apps like Messenger Kids. Because students are together all day, if there is constant communication via technology when they are home after school, the kids don't get down time from each other. Even a smiley face emoji can spark unintended conflict, Meehan said.

Another factor in conflict resolution is the student's own family and culture, Alongi pointed out. Each family has its own ways to resolve an issue; there might be generational differences, cultural differences and so on, and that family dynamic has a big impact on how kids approach conflict resolution in school.

Kids are never going to be in perfect harmony with each other, but guiding kids on ways to resolve their conflicts rather than an adult stepping in and doing it for them will benefit the kids long after they've left school.

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-based freelance writer.

Other helpful articles

"Five strategies to Help Kids Resolve Conflict" on the PBS website: <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/5-strategies-to-help-kids-resolve-conflict>

"7 Ways to Teach Kids to Manage Their Own Conflicts" on the Edutopia website:

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/7-ways-teach-kids-manage-their-own-conflicts>

"Teaching Kids How to Deal With Conflict" on the Child Mind Institute website:

<https://childmind.org/article/teaching-kids-how-to-deal-with-conflict/>



5 FIVE WAYS

to protect your children from sexual abuse

Parents play the primary role in educating their children about sexual abuse. Here are 5 tips for teaching safety to the little ones God has entrusted to you.

1

Keep it practical. Teach your children the differences between safe touches and unsafe touches.

2

Tell your children that saying “no” is okay. Empower your children to say “no” if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable or touches them inappropriately.

3

Give your children a way to alert you. Tell your children they can use an excuse or share a special “code-word” with you to alert you about an unsafe person or situation.

4

Tell your children to report an unsafe touch.

Let your children know they should tell you if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe around any adult or peer. You can also identify other adults they can tell about unsafe touches.

5

Tell your children you trust them. If your child makes a report to you, believe him or her. Tell them it is not their fault and that you love them. Immediately bring the allegation to the attention of public authorities.



Promise to Protect

Pledge to Heal



ROMAN CATHOLIC
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Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Tammy Sylvester

Diocesan Coordinator of Safe Environment Education and Compliance
585-328-3228
Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6